CLIMBING
the
LADDER
in
Stilettos

Ten Strategies for Stepping Up
to Success and Satisfaction at Work

LYNETTE LEWIS
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Women and Our Shoes

Riding the subways of New York City each week, I’m amazed at how many women wear one pair of shoes to work, change into another pair at work, and carry yet another pair for plans after work.

Our lives as working women can often be reflected in our collection of shoes. We have so many roles and so many shoes to fill.

I often think of a friend who was asked to fill a bag with items that would help the others in her group at a leadership event understand more about who she is. She filled the bag with a dozen shoes and described the experiences she’d had wearing each one: the running shoes she wore in a marathon, the sensible heels in which she defended her PhD dissertation, and her favorite pair of stilettos worn at a black-tie event where she received an achievement award.

Ah yes, we do enjoy our shoes. Last year, American women spent nearly $17 billion on fashion footwear between October 2004 and October 2005. If
you think that sounds like a lot, you're right; it’s a 10 percent increase over the year before!

Now, when you want to climb a ladder, you don’t typically slip on a pair of stilettos. Some would say you can’t or shouldn’t, insisting, “Climbing ladders is dangerous. It’s a man’s job, and it requires rubber-soled shoes.”

Likewise, advancing a career as a woman is no simple task. It can be a slippery slope. There is juggling involved and a great deal of balance required. But regardless of how we describe it, climbing the corporate ladder is simply this: a real challenge.

The title of this book is a metaphor for the challenges women face in today’s working world. Climbing a ladder (a typically masculine task) in stilettos (a feminine fashion icon) sounds almost laughable. At the very least, it sounds more like a circus feat than a legitimate endeavor. For years, that’s how it felt for me. Some days, it still does.

Nevertheless, if we believe in our path, we should continue moving upward with our collection of shoes in tow.

Personally, I’m not a big fan of ladders. Just the other afternoon while helping my husband hang new curtains in our living room, I had to climb a ladder and found it quite precarious, even in running shoes.

I am, however, a fan of stilettos. Though I certainly don’t wear them every day, and rarely at work, my stilettos tend to accompany the many roles I play:

- the professional in conservative black stilettos with a gray pencil skirt and silk button-down blouse;
- the single woman, and later the wife, wearing strappy stilettos with a favorite dinner dress;
- the fun-loving friend on a Friday night in leopard-print stilettos with designer jeans.
Women and Our Shoes

Amid the many roles you also play, thank you for picking up this book. I am honored that you would take some of your very precious time to walk with me through these pages. Ideally, rather than you reading, I wish we were together in person, chatting over a cup of coffee or a glass of iced tea out on my front porch.

I’d ask you how you’ve been doing lately. Are you fulfilled in your work? What has been on your heart as you think about how and where you spend your days? Do you have a sense of expectancy and joy about the future? What are your greatest challenges? Tell me about your children or your latest travels. If you could do anything in the world without the fear of failing, what would you do?

I think we’d find that we have much in common. As women, we hope for many of the same things, worry over similar trials, and long for more time and meaning and joy. We’d probably laugh as we share common experiences and get teary-eyed as we talk about the times we wondered how we’d ever make it through.

Perhaps someday our paths will cross, and you and I will have the pleasure of meeting in person. In the meantime, we can carry on our conversation in the pages of this book. I will ask you much about yourself and in return will offer you insights into my personal journey of climbing the proverbial ladder. I’ve done it as a single woman, a wife, a new mother, and a professional who highly values her work.

It has by no means been a storybook climb. There have been seasons filled with unanswered questions and anger at closed doors and delays. There have also been times of deep joy and opportune surprise. There have been days when I didn’t feel like I was going anywhere.

I personally never intended to step up the corporate ladder. I figured I’d work a few years out of college at something fun and then meet the man of my dreams, get married, and have the luxury of choosing whether or not to continue working.

My story turned out to be much different than I expected. Yet after twenty-two years in the corporate world, I recognize patterns of thinking and working that have enabled me to find an abiding joy and satisfaction along the way. These are lessons sometimes learned the hard way, lessons I now share when speaking to women of all ages and vocations throughout each year. I have by no means done it perfectly, but I have adjusted along the way and stayed the course.

On the pages that follow, you will hear many stories in addition to my own. I will introduce you to some incredible women. They include new and old
friends, some of whom are longtime mentors who from near and far have
taught me many of the strategies I will share on the pages to come: Bridgette
Heller, president of the global baby and kids division of Johnson & Johnson;
Cecily Truett, sixteen-time Emmy-winning television producer; Sylvia
Hatchell, head women’s basketball coach
for the University of North Carolina; and
Denise Johnston, president of the adult
division at The Gap. These are just a few of
the women whose stories I hope will also
inspire you in specific, practical new ways.

I invite you to take in each story and
every lesson, reflecting on how you can
apply them to your own career and life.
These are women like you and me who hope
for all the joy, meaning, success, and satisfac-
tion that are available to us if we know where
to look for them and how to look at them. Why would we spend the majority of
our waking hours doing something that yields anything less?

There are a couple of key premises throughout the book that I should men-
tion before we get started. The first is that you are designed for greatness. Your
heart, mind, spirit, and soul do not easily accommodate mediocrity. Something
inside of each of us yearns to be set apart from the crowd, to be recognized for
something significant, to be able to achieve in ways that set a new standard of
excellence and inspire those watching to do the same for themselves.

I’m a personal fan of the cable channel HGTV (Home and Garden
Television). I love watching professional designers work with ordinary people
to transform their lackluster homes into things of beauty. It’s fascinating to see
what a few creative ideas and minimal investments can do to bring a room or
home to a place of beauty and greatness.

Our lives are often so similar. There is a place of excellence and greatness that
awaits us if we can just rally the right resources to help us get there. My hope
is that this book in your hands will be one of those resources, helping you craft
a new vision of what your life at work can be, providing ideas and practical
tools for beginning today on a journey to the most satisfying and rewarding life
possible, on and off the job.

The second premise is that we are all waiting and yearning for something. You
may be at a place of contentment in every area of your life. If so, be grateful because you are not in the majority. Most of us are still longing for something significant in one or more areas of our lives. It may be for a crucial promotion, for our wayward children to return home, for the relationship of our dreams to emerge, to have a baby, to get through our physical setbacks . . . The list goes on and on.

It is the tension between our vision of greatness and the challenges of waiting that often brings discouragement and stress. We miss the simple joys of today and often experience years of discontentment. This tension is evident in statistics such as these:

- 60 percent of women participate in the U.S. labor force.
- 40 percent of working women work evenings, nights, or weekends on a regular basis, and 33 percent work shifts different than their spouses or partners.
- 23 percent of women executives and professionals, globally, say they feel “super-stressed.”
- 25 percent of mothers who work full-time and have children under thirteen feel stress almost every day.²

The tension in my own life compelled me to search with resolve to find a place of satisfaction and joy. I laughed, cried, prayed, and spent hours talking with hundreds of women en route to discovering a few key tools that, after much testing, have proven to reap tangible rewards and sustainable results. Here on these pages are some of those women and a few of the tools we have acquired along the way. It’s certainly not an exhaustive list, but perhaps it is enough to give you some key insights that will inspire a sense of expectancy and motivation in your own career journey, regardless of where you are now.

Thank you for the pleasure of your company. I hope that the time you invest here yields a great reward in your daily life. We are on this journey together, still learning and still climbing, always considering just which shoes we ought to wear!
I stopped one day after reviewing a video I had just produced for IBM. It was a huge project; I had traveled to three continents, around the world in three weeks. It was a whirlwind, so thrilling and exciting. I’m sitting on my sofa, viewing the results, and realizing that I cannot relate to this piece of videotape. I cannot hug it or relate to it.

—Anne Page
President, APFilms
ONE

Why Am I Working?

I still remember that Monday morning in August. It was a blistering hot day in Manhattan, even in the early morning hours. I spent the typical hour getting ready, doing my hair, and making sure my makeup was just right. I had my coffee and smoothie and then headed out the door.

Just as I entered the subway station, the train was pulling away. I groaned, knowing exactly what that meant. The next eight minutes were like standing in a sauna. I’m sure the guy next to me thought he heard a faucet running, but no, it was just the sweat draining inside my blouse while my hair was frizzing up by the minute.

I rode the subway to 50th Street and then waited for the bus for ten minutes while the heat and humidity did further damage. The bus arrived and drove the two miles to the ferry station. But just as the bus pulled into the station, the ferry pulled out. Another twenty-minute wait. What would it be next?
I knew I’d be late to work, and at this point I couldn’t fathom the thought of going to the office at all.

By the time I finally arrived, I was a mess inside and out. My hair and outfit were ruined. I was exhausted from the commute. As I sat down at my desk in Jersey City overlooking the skyline of downtown Manhattan, negative thoughts flooded my head.

*No one really appreciates me around here. Why am I working here anyway? They don’t know my dreams, what I really want to be and do. I work hard, put in the hours, give them my best energy of the day, and for what? A paycheck that doesn’t feel like enough? Stress over having to please so many people?*

The discouragement brought me to tears. I knew I had to pull myself together. I wasn’t being paid to waste time crying at my desk. But how could I lift myself out of this sense of despair?

At that point I serendipitously thought of the young woman sitting in the office next door. Sandra and I had met the first day I started in the Jersey City office. I was her manager, and over the course of the last year, we’d become more than just colleagues; we were friends. I helped her discover some of her dreams and worked with her to map out a plan to align her job with those dreams. She had developed significantly that year, and the satisfaction I felt from having helped her was deeply rewarding.

Thinking of Sandra through my tears helped lift the heaviness. Perhaps she was one of the main reasons I was doing this job and working hard day after day.

Sandra often told me, “You are a gift, Lynette. You’ve helped me find my way.” Recalling this reminded me that my efforts were worth it. Helping people and changing lives do matter. This realization helped me get back in touch once again with the real reason I was working.

**THE CHALLENGE: I NEED TO FIND MEANING IN THE JOB I HAVE NOW**

Have you ever felt like I did on that Monday morning? There are times when a good job and an adequate paycheck aren’t enough for the energy and inconvenience it takes to get through the workday.

Often in times like this we feel especially alone. Everyone else around us appears to be coping quite well. We may look like we’re coping, but inside we
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wonder how long we can keep going. Can we find something that’s better aligned with our bigger ideas and dreams? It’s probably one of the most common, and important, questions people ask.

An extremely popular book in recent history is Rick Warren’s *The Purpose-Driven Life*. In fact, at the time of this writing, it is the all-time best-selling non-fiction hardback in America. This speaks volumes about where Americans find themselves in their work spectrum—most feel there is still something more to life than just work.

The success of Warren’s book falls in line with a study conducted by the Barna Research Group, which shows that half of Americans are “searching for meaning and purpose in life.” Author Os Guinness concurs. In his book *The Call: Finding and Fulfilling the Central Purpose of Your Life*, Guinness explains, “Deep in our hearts, we all want to find and fulfill a purpose bigger than ourselves. Only such a larger purpose can inspire us to heights we know we could never reach on our own. For each of us the real purpose is personal and passionate: to know what we are here to do, and why.”

Answering the “why” question is essential if we want to have rich, deep meaning in our careers. Women in particular seem to have something inside our hearts that demands we answer this question. We are made for meaning; we thrive by making a difference and helping others, by seeing our kids grow up to be successful adults who will make an impact on the world.

The reality, however, is that it’s not easy to derive this deeper meaning from our work. Some individuals, certainly in the minority, know what their purpose is early in life. They see themselves doing something great and find it natural to forge a pathway to get there. They arrive in their twenties or earlier, when the rest of us are just beginning to realize we’ve been asking the wrong questions—or not questioning anything at all.

Most of us simply find ourselves on a certain path or in what someone else might call a “career.” Yet outside of financial provision, this career often seems void of deep significance. We might have a college education or vocational
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training or now, after years of working, various experiences and company titles that are scattered across our résumés.

But all these credentials don’t necessarily bring meaning; they don’t easily come together in answering that all-important question that hangs somewhere in the background: Why?

Why this job? Why these coworkers? Why these responsibilities in this place at this time? Why not something else? Something better? The questions beg for answers—not regularly perhaps, but occasionally, like on a bad day when it’s hot outside and you miss the train.

UNCOVERING YOUR PURPOSE

My dear friend Anne Page, president of her own communications company, and I were chatting awhile ago. She described a personal epiphany she had a few years ago, one that occurs for many women after years of working on their careers.

I stopped one day after reviewing a video I had just produced for IBM. It was a huge project; I had traveled to three continents, around the world in three weeks. It was a whirlwind, so thrilling and exciting. I’m sitting on my sofa, viewing the results, and realizing that I cannot relate to this piece of videotape. I cannot hug it or relate to it. It was such a successful project, such a pinnacle, and it was done. I could show a video, but it was just a video; it wasn’t helping me live my life as a whole person. What a lonely and sad moment. At forty-seven, I realized there was a lot I had missed. Somehow I had it wired that this was what I had to do to be successful. So I had to ask, “Is this success, sitting in my living room with this video?” It may be a successful career, but not a successful life.

This epiphany moment led Anne to make significant changes in her life, ultimately finding more time for relationships (she met and married her soul mate) and taking time for other personal pursuits (fixing up their home). These changes have enhanced her career success while bringing greater satisfaction than ever before. In short, Anne discovered a deeper sense of purpose.

Purpose is a topic I’ve been studying in depth over the last five years. I’ve concluded that discovering our purpose is the foundation for living a satisfied life. This conclusion is nothing new, but its application certainly seems elusive to many working women, as evidenced by Anne’s confession.
Over the years, I’ve conducted workshops designed to help people of all ages and vocations uncover their purpose—CEOs, business owners, executives, and college students. All of them are eager to answer the question, *why?* However, most of them, like Anne, have spent little to no time thinking about it. Most people, myself included, spend time focused on the *what* of our lives.

What am I going to do with my life? What makes me happy? What do I want in a mate? What can I change to be more satisfied?

There are small distinctions between the words *why* and *what*. But the implications of answering these questions are vastly different. When put to our careers, answering *why* requires knowing our purpose. Webster’s dictionary defines *purpose* this way: “a result or effect that is intended or desired; an intention.”

*What*, on the other hand, is answered by our mission—what it is we will do. *Mission* is defined as “a specific task with which a person or a group is charged.”

We first need to know why we are where we are, and why we want to do a particular thing, before we can decide what we will then do. In simple terms, we should know our motives before we lay out our mission.

The process of answering *why* is not that difficult. In fact, most of us already have a sense of the answer. We just don’t take the time to think about it, ponder the elements that comprise it, and write something down so that our purpose is clear to ourselves and others.

Wouldn’t you like to know why and to be able to answer for yourself and others, in a succinct manner, not only what you do but why you do it?

Envision yourself at a typical party or networking event. You strike up a conversation with someone who asks the usual question, “What do you do?” Rather than giving your job title, you instead tell the person why you do what you do. For me, it might go something like this: “I am passionate about helping people discover their purpose and live out their dreams. Speaking and writing are my favorite ways to do this.”

Imagine the response. The individual has just been given a glimpse into my heart. He or she understands why I get out of bed in the morning. I bet it makes me more memorable, too, a woman with passion and purpose instead of only a name and job title.
Now imagine that you and I are on my front porch and I ask you the all-important why question. Describe your deepest desire and dream. Then tell me why. Why do you want to do it? Why do you believe it will bring you fulfillment? The answers you share with me are clues to your purpose. They will help point your mind to the things your heart already knows.

On the pages that follow, you will find a more thorough exercise that should kick-start you along the path to clarifying your own personal purpose. It will get your juices flowing and help you write a personal purpose statement that captures the spirit of who you are and why you do what you do.

**Articulating Your Purpose**

Recently I was working with a group of executive women, women who have skillfully climbed the ladder to places of significant success and influence. Many of them are now asking what their next move should be. We ventured through this same exercise, which helped them think about their purpose. I loved looking across that room as these dear, brilliant women took time for themselves (something they rarely do) and thought about the bigger questions in life.

I asked them to circle words (like you will do in a minute) that spoke to them and excited them most. I then asked them to share with a partner why they chose those words. The room buzzed with excitement, laughter, and enthusiasm. The faces of these women brightened as they thought about what they love to do most and why.

Then they took the three or four descriptive words they circled and began putting them in a sentence to form their purpose statement. I told them to focus not on the flow of words but on getting the concepts together in a way that speaks of who they are.

Several of them shared their first stab at a purpose statement. Some of them had crafted statements that sounded eloquent, while others were still laboring to pull together phrases that hit the mark and made their hearts soar.
Why Am I Working?

Bridgette Heller, president of the global baby and kids division of Johnson & Johnson, was one of these women. Not only did she write her purpose statement, but she shared with me a process of discovery she had gone through during the previous three years.

While vice president at Kraft Foods, she had enjoyed significant success. However, her daughters would soon be teenagers, and she needed to reassess her own definition of success.

I was now sitting at a place in corporate America that I never imagined I'd be, needing a definition of success that extended beyond where I was. So I began thinking about what was really important—a solid, happy family life, service to the community, and the personal/spiritual piece that is the foundation for everything else. I needed to define what success looked like in each of those realms.

The easier realms were family, community, and spiritual. The biggest struggle was the professional side. People will chart your progress and figure out if they are keeping up; they'll sabotage others. This had been draining and was inconsistent with my spiritual journey.

I came to grips with this as I decided to leave Kraft. I went through a grieving process, asking myself, "What am I doing walking away from everything I know to something I don't?" After three years of lots of soul-searching, I chose Johnson & Johnson.

My husband, chief of cardiology at a hospital in the Bronx at the time, watched how my soul searching brought me closer to our girls and gave me new clarity around what I wanted to do. It inspired him to quit cold turkey. Now it's his turn. He is taking classes and spending lots of time with our daughters, taking them on camping trips and having conversations that help them learn and grow.

Our purpose is not something we can sit down and think about for a few minutes, then write with perfection. Rather, it's the start of a process to unlock our hearts, like Bridgette did. It is something that takes time, reflection, and thought.

Rarely do we give ourselves the chance to do this. We have a schedule to keep, kids to get to school, projects to finish, people to manage, planes to catch, e-mails to answer. But discovering our purpose is time well spent, time
that sets the foundation for everything else we are hoping to receive or achieve.

There is something powerful about articulating truth. Have you ever heard someone describe something in a way that just perfectly captures a thought you’ve had or an idea you’ve pondered? You hear it phrased in just the right way, and you say, “Yes. That is what I’ve been feeling all along.”

So it is with your purpose statement. It becomes the *aha* moment, that simple yet profound way of saying something that brings all the many facets of who you are and hope to be into focus. Your purpose statement becomes, in many ways, your compass, guiding you to the activities, people, and places that will bring the deepest satisfaction and delight.

The exercise that follows will coach you through a stimulating process of articulating your own purpose. It is a tool I have used for years with women of all ages and stages in their careers. The process is not rocket science and will only help you begin discovering and articulating answers to the whys of your life. But as you dive right in, this exercise will get your creative juices flowing in the right direction and help ignite new enthusiasm in your many endeavors.

**THE STRATEGY: CREATE A PURPOSE STATEMENT FOR LIFE AND WORK**

Before you can articulate your purpose, you must first determine exactly what it is. Rarely is this a quick process or a one-time effort. Your purpose will evolve and change over time based on the season you are in and your level of self-knowledge.

Start by asking yourself the following questions:
Why Am I Working?

1. When people explain why they want me involved or why they referred someone to me, what do they say?

2. Which of my abilities and gifts are most often noted and affirmed by my colleagues?

3. What activities bring me the most joy and satisfaction?

4. What could I be passionate about doing for the next ten years?

5. If I could have any role/position at my current organization or elsewhere, what would I do?

6. Given my life experiences, my education, and my gifts, what unique attributes set me apart from others?

Your purpose will evolve and change over time based on the season you are in and your level of self-knowledge.
Climbing the Ladder in Stilettos

Notice the adjectives and ideas in your answers above. Are there common threads? Do you see any words repeated in more than one answer? Do you find yourself going back to a consistent or central theme? If so, this is a good start toward defining your unique purpose. Keep these ideas in mind as we move now to your purpose statement.

Purpose statements usually include two elements:

- a word or phrase that indicates a change in status, such as to increase, to decrease, to eliminate, to prevent; and
- an identification of the problem or condition to be changed.

From the following list, circle the four words that most appeal to you. The words you choose will help you understand what actions most motivate and excite you.

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Look at the four words you selected. Why did you pick them? Are they similar to one another or different? You can keep all four or narrow them down even further.

Now, in the space below, using the words you have chosen, begin articulating your purpose statement. Write it out in a variety of ways. Then try to state your mission as well. Keep in mind that you are simply putting into language much of what you already know, and this is only a beginning point. Here is the simple outline to follow:

My purpose is to:

(WHY you do what you do—your purpose statement. Use the words you circled in the list above: *to increase, to build, to inspire, to bring*, etc.)

Through or by or with:

(WHAT you will do—your mission. This should be very general and include how you will impact others.)

As you write your purpose, let it “cook” for a while over the coming days and weeks. Ask your closest family members and friends if they think you’re hitting
the mark. As new ideas emerge, feel free to write and rewrite them until you are happy with the result.

Remember that your purpose statement will change over time and be modified through the various seasons of your life. The central elements (the primary three or four words you selected), however, should remain fairly constant throughout your life and career.

Don’t forget the difference between purpose and mission. Focus on why you do what you do (purpose) versus what you want to do (mission). You should have one central purpose, but you may have many missions that accomplish that purpose.

As an example, my purpose is “to inspire and motivate people to live lives of hope, overcoming every challenge on the way to their dreams.” This is a constant that weaves through my many missions. My missions are what I will do to achieve that purpose, and they are numerous—as a writer, a speaker, a wife and mother, a friend, and so forth.

So go ahead, write down ideas about your purpose and mission. Be bold. Dream out loud. Think big. Imagine what you would say in your proudest moment as you describe why your life matters and the difference you are making. Fear, guilt, or practicality may make you hesitant, but faith will keep you bold. Choose to believe in yourself, and resist fear during this significant time.

Having a concise purpose statement in writing puts you way out in front of most people and empowers you to keep on dreaming. Harvard psychologist David McClelland has extensively studied high achievers and concludes that successful people possess one common characteristic: they fantasize and dream incessantly about how to achieve their goals.7

Olympic downhill ski medalist and corporate speaker Bonnie St. John told me recently,

If you keep your vision [purpose] locked up inside and you never write it down, the odds of it actually happening are low. You need to be willing to talk about it. There are lots of reasons people don’t want to talk about it, especially women. We can be perfectionists; we’re afraid we’re going to be seen as arrogant. So I say,
Why Am I Working?

“You don’t have to wait until your vision is perfect; if you do, you will sound arrogant.” Rather, be in an open-ended conversation, saying, “This is what I’m thinking about doing. What do you think?” If your talk is open-ended, it helps you clarify it and understand more about how to grow in it.8

Your purpose statement lays the foundation for your dreams and goals by helping you address the most important issue in life: knowing and understanding why you are here.

Once you get in tune with thewhys of your career, then you can begin to answer thewhats andhows. As we move throughout this book, we will build on this powerful foundation of purpose.