

15 KEYS TO A SUCCESSFUL CAREER
Presentation to the Mississippi Forestry Association
Student Luncheon
October, 2008

Dr. James C. Kroll,
Henry M. Rockwell Chair in Forestry
Arthur Temple College of Forestry & Agriculture
Stephen F. Austin State University
Nacogdoches, TX

First of all, I would like to thank you for giving the honor of speaking with this important group. You are the future of our profession, and I view my comments to you today as very important. In an hour, I will be presenting a four hour presentation to the landowner members of the Mississippi Forestry Association. My topic will be on managing white-tailed deer on their land. Although I view this as an important presentation-- with long-term impacts on wildlife management in Mississippi-- you are even more important to me!

Standing before you is a man who has survived a lifetime of physical and mental abuse. Playing football in college, plus numerous accidents have left me with almost every bone broken in my body. I have had two broken necks, and have narrowly escaped death on more than one occasion. I once spent a considerable time in the hospital, suffering from a total physical collapse. Yet, in spite of all this, you also are looking at the most blessed man on earth! The Lord has given me everything I ever dreamed of experiencing. I have spent the last 35 years, literally living with white-tailed deer. I am living the life many of the 13 million hunters in America would love to have. We are in our 6th season of North American WHITETAIL Television, one of the top programs on the Outdoor Channel. I write for the top outdoor magazines, have written 10 books, and get to hunt deer in every corner of their range. I manage thousands of acres of private lands for quality deer. In short, I am living the dream!

I am not telling you this to brag of in self-promotion; only to underscore I may have something to say which could help you in your career. As a fresh out of graduate school Ph.D., I sat in faculty meetings, listening to the older professors and thinking to myself, "What does that old man know about anything!" You may be sitting there thinking the same thing, but some of you will listen to what I have to offer and take heed. And, it is YOU I am talking to today!

I have entitled this talk, "15 Keys to a Successful Career." These are the hard-learned lessons of my 35 year career. They are based on experience, which I define as learning to recognize a mistake when you make it again! Some of these, you probably will think are "old hat," but I promise you it is the old principles that have stood the test of time. So, let's get at them!

Dream!

Never let anyone tell you cannot achieve your dreams! Dare to dream big and develop the attitude only YOU can limit what you can accomplish. When I was 7 years old, I was asked what I wanted to be. "I am going to be a whitetail biologist," was my answer. Well, in those days there was no such thing. When I graduated from Texas A&M University with my doctorate, we were in the height of the environmental movement. Colleges and universities were turning out thousands of wildlife biologists, few of which could find a job. So, I decided to make my own. Arriving at Stephen F. Austin State University in 1973, I was given the job of developing a new program in wildlife management. SFA was not the esteemed place Texas A&M had been, and few professional biologists took us very seriously. I decided deer are what I love and deer would be the key to establishing a center of excellence at SFA. Mr. Daniel Lay, one of the first biologists hired by the Texas Parks & Wildlife Department (then, Texas Game, Fish and Oyster Commission), on learning about my plan to develop a deer research program, called me in for a major bottom chewing. "I am very disappointed in you," Dan chided, "you have too much potential to waste it on whitetails!" Dan went on to proclaim everything we needed to know about deer already had been discovered. Dan is long passed now, and although my admiration for him continues to this day, he was wrong! In the last 35 years most of the critical management information about whitetails was discovered, and I am proud to say SFA had a great deal to do with this work. I never let anyone dampen my dreams. Yet, having a dream is not enough.

Make a plan.

It has become trite to say this, but if you fail to plan, you plan to fail! When I was in undergraduate school, I lost track of the number of hours I spent sitting on my bed, pouring over the Baylor University course catalog. Each course was selected based on whether or not it met both the college requirements for a biology degree, and how it fit into my career goals. I bet some of you also have done this, trying to find the fastest way to getting that degree.

Once I decided on establishing a center of excellence in deer research at SFA, the next step was to develop a long-term (20 year) plan to accomplish this goal. What could set us apart from the "bigger" university programs? I often ask my students, "What is THE most effective management tool?" They make many attempts before they give up. The answer really is simple: The one that used! University scientists make the mistake of doing research repetitively that has no relevance to the very folks who need it. So, I decided to find out what landowners, wildlife managers and hunters wanted to know about whitetails. Once I had some answers, the plan was developed. The result has been discoveries and tools such as infrared-triggered cameras, the first food plot research, information on nutrition and genetics, plus new discoveries about mature buck behavior in the context of hunting.

Just finding out what people want to know is not the final step. The next is developing ways to get this information to the “consumer” as quickly as possible. That is why a critical part of my plan was to develop my communication skills. Believe it or not, you are looking at a pathologic introvert! Like many wildlife biologists I rather would be alone in the woods right now. But, this gets you no where in this business, so I spent a lot of time learning about writing (something I hated in college) and giving effective presentation. That is how I came to be on TV, write books, magazine articles and presentations such as the one I will be giving in about an hour.

Well, I now am coming to the end of my second 20-year plan; and, believe it or not, I have a new one. It is aimed mostly at working with young people like you, giving back to the profession that has made me a successful, happy, wealthy man.

My advice is to sit down in a quiet place and ask yourself this question: “If my dreams were fulfilled, what will I be doing in 10 years, 20 years, etc.” You need to include when and if you plan to retire, setting a financial plan in place for this. Write down a description of what you think is the perfect job.

Learn the difference between Perfection and Excellence.

"We are going to relentlessly chase perfection knowing full well we will not catch it, because nothing is perfect. But we are going to relentlessly chase it. I am not remotely interested in just being good."...Vince Lombardi

I am, unfortunately a perfectionist. It is a curse as far as I am concerned. Nothing ever is as good as I would like it to be. As soon as I am finished with a project, I step back and immediately see the imperfections. Fortunately, eventually I came to grips with this problem. What Coach Lombardi was saying is, although we cannot ever achieve perfection, we will find excellence along the way. Until my recent promotion, I supervised around 30 top-notch technology experts. Without a doubt they are remarkably talented individuals. However, I often observed some of them suffer from what I call “perfection paralysis,” meaning they want so badly for things to be perfect, they never get the job done! Perfection should not be an excuse for lack of productivity. We have to learn to live with the imperfections of our world, especially in field that does not know 99% tolerances. Sooner or later in life, you have to make a decision: right, wrong or toss-up! What I tell my folks is what a famous general once told his troops: “I don’t care about gigabits or megabits, I want it in the speed of need!” The real key to finding excellence lies in the next principle.

Work hard, but work smart! Be willing to pay the price.

Often a student will come into my office after receiving a poor test grade. “Dr. Kroll,” he or she will say, “I studied for three days on this material.” You need to

learn the difference between working hard and working smart. If you do not get the job done, it does not matter to anyone how much time you spend on the task. I am a bad role model, because to the casual observer I just sit down and bang something out at the last minute! In reality, when I do a job (this article is an example), it is after a great deal of thought and organization in my head and on paper. I budget my time so the vast majority of effort is spent planning, rather than doing. That frees up a whole lot of time for additional work and accomplishment.

The second part of this principle is, are you willing to pay the price? When I was in college, I literally gave up hunting and fishing for almost 8 years. My buddies took off every weekend, and sometimes during the week for recreation. Many were much smarter than me, but they were not willing to do what it takes to achieve their dreams. I generally have worked on the idea I can out work and out effort the other guy! Self discipline is one of the most important attributes you need to develop in order to succeed. As I noted earlier, when I graduated there were thousands of wildlife science graduates competing for the same jobs. Yet, because I was willing to work hard and pursue excellence, there really was little true competition. The pay off is obvious. Today, I get to hunt and fish, and people actually pay me to do it!

Develop good work habits.

After almost 40 years of teaching, I honestly believe the average student thinks when they walk across that stage and receive that cardboard tube that does not include a diploma (pay your bills first), on the other side of the stage is someone with a magic wand who taps them on the head, bestowing good work habits! The time is NOW to develop these attributes. Part of “working smart” is good work habits; using time to your advantage. Again, I return to self-discipline. Learn also to be organized and become a lifelong note-taker. As my good friend and colleague, Ben Koerth likes to say, “A short pencil is better than a long memory.”

Show up and keep your word!

Again, it may sound trite but the win goes to he/she who show up. You cannot ever expect to excel if you are never there when decisions and assignments are being made. The students and workers who always impress me are the ones who I can count on to show up to help, even without asking.

The second part of this principle is one dying a slow death in our modern society: always keep your word, even if it hurts to do so! It is easy to promise to do something, yet another to get it done. A person is known by how often they keep their word. The worst thing a person could ever say about me, other than being a liar, is I do not keep my word! Old fashioned ideas are time-tested, so do not belittle this principle.

There is an additional, very important aspect to this principle. BE ON TIME! I tell my staff and students, "If you are 10 minutes early, you are 15 minutes late!" Timeliness, the lack thereof is one of the most irritating things to me as a professional. Making people wait on you is rude and shows little concern for others. I have lost count of the number of times students have shown up late for field trips, hair not combed, breath stinking from last night's alcohol and clothes looking like they slept in them (probably did)! My friend and colleague, Dr. Mike Fountain came up with a novel way to get students to events and classes on time. He establishes a meeting time of something like, 8:23 am. It is a shame he has to do this, but it tends to make a point.

I know young people tend to sleep later than us older folks, but establish a habit of getting up early and going to bed at a reasonable time. There is no reason to "pull all nighters." If you follow the other principles, you almost never will have to work late.

Be a pest!

Every year, there are a handful of students walking across that stage whom I never have noticed. They are what I call the "invisible people." They just go to class and take the tests. Some do perfectly well grade-wise, but lose out on a complete education. Just going to class is not being educated. Your professors are being paid a lot of money to provide you with a service. Demand you get your money's worth! Trust me, these folks have a lot to offer, both in knowledge and experience. As part of "showing up," you need to hang around their offices, ask questions, volunteer to help out with research projects and be obvious. It will pay off in multiple ways, including when that all important time comes to find a job. "Sure I have a great student in mind for that job," I will say, "she always shows up and works hard without me even asking." These are the folks you want to help. So, be a pest!

Avoid bad role models.

A university is a den of temptations, especially for a 18 year old. There are all sorts of "friends," who like to skip classes and go out drinking on Thursday night (the favorite in modern universities). Yet, where will these "friends" be when you need them? Will they give you a job after you graduate, or drop out? Winners hang around with winners. I am not saying to be a snob, just to pick your friends carefully. If you can have bad role models, obviously you also can have good ones. That is what the next principle is about.

Look and act like a professional, starting now!

Even when I was a freshman, my friends kidded me about my appearance. I always wear starched shirts and jeans. I take my hat off when I come into a building, and do not use being in the field as an excuse for sloppiness. I try to

dress in a manner that fits the situation. Trust me, I do not enjoy wearing a tie and coat, but it is far better to be over-dressed in a situation than the reverse.

How does a professional act? First of all, a professional does not use profanity! Being in television, I learned quickly how using foul language can get you into trouble, so I never use them. Further, there are words that may not be profane, but reveal lack of professionalism. I am talking about bad grammar. This not only applies to your verbal communications, but also to everything you write. Going back to self-discipline, the trick is to do things in a timely manner so you have time to think them out and edit what you write. Never shy away from seeking help from professors and colleagues. A last minute job, however, seldom reflects excellence!

Learn to say "Thank You."

My wife and I once provided a scholarship to the College each year for a wildlife student. After three years of giving the scholarship and not having a single recipient say, "Thank You," we reconsidered the practice. I see this poor behavior over and over again in so many aspects of my professional and personal life. What on earth does it cost you to say, Thank You? While I am on this point, you also need to learn to say "Yes, Sir." I am a senior citizen and I still say these things and address people with this courtesy. Again, it is all part of professionalism.

Capture the moral high ground in every aspect of your life.

I am not in any way saying here today I am a perfect person. But, I can tell you it has served me well to always attempt to capture the moral high ground in any situation. What I mean by this is think out your actions and position, then take a firm stand on what is morally right to do; again, even if it costs you in the short term. None of us can say we never have lied, but we can strive never to do so. I learned the hard way, it is far easier always to tell the truth, than to try to remember your story later. There have been times when I have heard people say they think I am arrogant. Wrong! I certainly am not that, but they are confusing my steadfast intent to stick to my moral and ethical principles, no matter what the cost. If that is arrogance, then so be it!

Along that line, never let anyone get away with saying an untruth about you or any friend. One of the problems with modern America is people do not hold others accountable for their words and actions. This does not mean you have to get into a fist fight, rather you simply can make clear you do not appreciate such talk. If you cannot say it to a person's face, then you are a coward, pure and simple!

Strive for wisdom.

I tell my students we will teach them the science of wildlife and forestry, but wisdom must come with time. I define wisdom as the unique combination of

knowledge and experience. Failure is not a bad thing! Each time you fail, provided you learn from the experience, makes you a stronger person. As I noted above, if you strive to associate with people more wise than you, the process can be accelerated. Why make mistakes others have made. Be smart enough to listen to wisdom. Do not fear to try, ever. The more you try, the harder you work, the more “lucky” you become.

Realize “smart” only goes so far!

I have supervised many smart people in my career. My management style always is to hire people I feel are smarter than me. But, smart only takes you so far. Some of my employees either tell me or want to tell me they are smarter than me. My response is I measure performance by the number of assignments that get done on time, not by IQ. [By the way, mine actually is in the 160s, but it has been more a curse than a blessing!] So, I really do not care how smart you are! It is not relevant to the conversation. I rather would hire someone who is highly motivated and works hard than a smart person.

Set the right priorities.

Perhaps the hardest lesson I had to learn was my career was not the most important thing in my life. The first 10 years of my career involved making my family sacrifice for me, rather than me for them! Those days, unfortunately are forever lost, no matter how much I wish to relive them. So, you need to get your priorities straight. In my opinion, they should be: faith, family, friends, then career. As the biblical saying goes, “What good does it do a man to gain the world and lose his soul?” There is no contradiction in what I said earlier and this principle. I if you follow the first 13 key principles, you will be amazed how much time you have for friends and family, as well as your faith. Take time to call a friend, and always show up when they need you. Although a theatrical presentation, I was taken with something Doc Holliday said in the movie, *Tombstone*. When asked by Texas Jack why he risked his health to help out Wyatt Earp, Holliday simply replied, “Wyatt is my friend!” Enough said!

Do not neglect your soul!

I am not here today to promote any one belief or religion. I really do not care what religion you practice, as long as you have faith in a higher order. I happen to be a Christian, one who practiced but did not live the tenets of my religion for many years. To care for your soul, even if you do not believe in God, is good mental health. Always remember, there are things far greater than you! Be introspective and strive to understand what makes you tick and what you believe in. A little meditation is a healing activity. I get up very early, get myself a cup of coffee, sit in my den and “enjoy my company.” In so doing, I can organize my thoughts and my day.

Unfortunately, my fear today is not all of you will heed my advice. But, if I have gotten through to some of you, my time has been well spent! I have shared with you the things that have made me what I am today; a success in the strictest sense. That is, I have achieved my goals, and I am happy with my life!