

The Insightful Leader Podcast Transcript

Feeling stuck? here's how to move your career forward. Practical advice for detecting your blind spots—and pushing past them.

Jessica LOVE: 2020 has been a tumultuous year, to say the least. With COVID-19 changing the way we work, socialize, and learn, our lives have been turned upside down. But Carter Cast doesn't think that should stop us from moving forward in our careers.

Carter CAST: The number one thing we have to do is realize that this change is probably gonna be lasting in many ways. And the sooner we can understand that, the sooner we can start looking, flipping the topic on its head, and saying, what are some of the benefits that we have now that we didn't have before?

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LOVE: And in fact, maybe the change is just what we need to progress our careers further.

CAST: How can I use these circumstances as a catalyst, to try new things? Can I actually test and **experiment** and try things that I normally wouldn't, in this time.

LOVE: Welcome to a new season of *The Insightful Leader*, from Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management.

We hope you've been enjoying the special episodes we released over the summer, featuring candid dialogues between our faculty and various leaders about the challenges facing their organizations and industries. We'll continue to sprinkle those dialogues into our feed throughout this season too. And we'll also be trying something new: The Insightful Leader Live, a series of live webinars that starts later this month. In our first webinar, Kellogg's Brenda Ellington Booth will be helping leaders, in real time, to improve their emotional intelligence. At the end of this episode, we'll share how you can sign up to participate—for free.

But today, we're kicking off our new season with insights from Carter Cast, Clinical Professor of Entrepreneurship and operating partner for Pritzker Group Venture Capital. In this episode he explores what holds people back from career success, and why you might be feeling stuck in your career.

CAST: Fear and ego are two of the biggest things that hold us back. Fear eating away at us makes us tentative, and probably not testing and trying things that we could.

LOVE: And how now might be just the right time, to come unstuck.

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LOVE: In his book *The Right and Wrong Stuff, How Brilliant Careers Are Made*, Carter Cast explored just that. What makes a career and what can cause you to get off track, or as Cast calls it, derail. And one major cause of career derailment he found, is one we might not even realize is there. Blind spots.

CAST: We all have blind spots. We all have areas that we are not strong in, or areas that we think we're strong in that we're not. High potential high performers are much less likely to derail because they have a higher amount of self-awareness. And they don't have these big glaring blind spots.

LOVE: Cast found that people who are in the top 10 percent of their companies rate themselves similarly to how others rate them—peers, subordinates, superiors. So, if they've given themselves a two in creative thinking, for example, it's most likely others gave them that rating too. So, these top performers aren't necessarily experts at everything. But they are aware of their strengths and their weaknesses.

CAST: High performers are more self-aware. Where they think they're good, others probably think they're good. Where they think they're average, other people probably agree. Where they think they're weak, other people would agree. So, people that were high performers, were well aligned with their peers, about their own level of self-awareness and where they're competent and where they're incompetent. Those people derailed 620 percent less often. Isn't that amazing? 620 percent.

LOVE: But gaining self-awareness and finding those blind spots can be tricky, because we don't even necessarily know what we're looking for. So, what's one way we can work on our self-awareness and target those blind spots?

CAST: The antidote to having a blind spot is to ask for a constant stream of feedback. There's a great feedback model that I learned from Craig Wortmann, a fellow professor. Craig said, use the world's simplest feedback model, which is this: You go to your boss, and you say, boss, what's one thing I did well in there? And then they tell you. Then you

ask, what's one thing I could have done better? So, one thing well, one thing better. Don't overcomplicate it.

If we asked for a constant stream of feedback from others: did well, did well. Do differently, do differently. We would get rid of those blind spots we had. And it would, help our career development and our career progress.

LOVE: Alongside blind spots, Cast found another cause of career derailment. A misalignment between a person's job and their personal values & motives.

CAST: I think companies assume that employees are in the right position. But many times, I found in my derailment research, people were derailing, not because they weren't talented. Not because they had an interpersonal issue. They were derailing, because they didn't have energy for the job itself. They were in the wrong job. So, lots of times, you've got to start with values and motives. Values is what's important to me. And motives is what gives me energy. Because the reason you might not be enjoying your job might be that it just doesn't appeal to your motives—that you don't have the energy for the work anymore.

LOVE: As part of his book, Cast created a motive assessment: five helpful questions that you can ask yourself, to better understand what motivates you.

CAST: Are you motivated by achievement? Are you motivated by affiliation? By relational closeness with other people? To what extent? Are you motivated by power? Power's not a dirty word. But are you motivated by status and the ability to sort of move the gears? Are you motivated by autonomy, the desire to have discretion over your time and your work? Or are you motivated by purpose? By doing work that is meaningful to you.

LOVE: And Cast knows just how important it is to get this alignment right. Because it's a valuable career lesson he learned for himself.

CAST In 2010, I left my old career because I didn't have the energy for it anymore. And I went about trying to figure out, what did I have energy for. And I found out that this theme throughout my life has been, I love working with other people on their development. And so that got me into two jobs, academics and teaching and working as a venture partner working with our portfolio companies, entrepreneurs, that actually scratched that itch. So, it really came down to aligning my work with the motives that drove me to have energy.

LOVE: Blind spots and misaligned values and motives are often at the heart of getting stuck in your career. But there's one more derailer that's really important to know about, especially in this moment.

CAST: The key problem though, the derailer is - people that are recalcitrant, and just don't like change. They aren't adapting well to changing circumstances. Usually it's led by fear. Fear of change. Or it's led by getting in a rut of sameness.

LOVE: So, if you're someone who is afraid of change, and this year has brought nothing BUT a series of changes for you, Cast has a helpful way of looking at it. Or reframing it.

CAST: The biggest thing we have to fight in this phase we're in now is, we have to realize there is a seismic shift going on, and it is going to last beyond these few months. And there's going to be changes, right? There's probably going to be changes with travel. There's probably going to be changes to consumer consumption behavior. There's going to be changes by the way, we all do the work. So, if you're in sales, you better learn how to sell virtually, if you're used to going out hopping on a plane and going and visiting customers

The number one thing we have to do is realize that this change is probably gonna be lasting in many ways. And the sooner we can understand that the sooner we can start looking, flipping the topic on its head, and saying, what are some of the benefits that we have now that we didn't have before?

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CAST: How can I use these circumstances as a catalyst, to try new things? Can I actually test and experiment and try things that I normally wouldn't, in this time. Maybe because you have more time on your hands, because you're not commuting? Maybe there's things you can try to do in these times. And you can use it to your advantage somehow.

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LOVE: As the world of work continues to shift around us, we don't have to put our careers on hold. In fact, now might be just the right time to try new things. So, if you're feeling stuck to your desk, your Zoom room, your computer, or just generally in your career, Cast has a few practical suggestions on how to make the most of the current situation to make some positive changes in your own working life and get out of that rut.

CAST: So overall to become unstuck, it's a really good idea to have little bets. This is a really good book by a fellow named Peter Sims, who talks about creating little bets. And he cites different examples of Chris Rock developing new comedy routines by testing new material in teeny little venues. He'd actually go up, and he would read new jokes, and he would gauge the reaction of a small audience. He would do it with a small venue, instead of going to some big place where the stakes were high. So maybe you can find little bets.

LOVE: So, Cast's first suggestion for making a little bet? Experiment with a new role, or identity for yourself.

CAST: We learn by doing. So, to become unstuck, test and try new things. Maybe you try to be a consultant or a contractor, maybe you moonlight, maybe you become an advisor to a group, try experimenting. One academic called it testing your provisional self. So, you create different identities and try them on. Maybe you can test your way into becoming unstuck by trying new things.

LOVE: And since the way we socialize and interact with our friends and colleagues have changed anyway, maybe now is the time to broaden your social circles.

CAST: Another thing that helps people become unstuck, is to change their social interactions. Many times, to change, we have to change our reference group and find new reference groups of people that will encourage us to develop in new ways or that don't see us in our old way.

LOVE: Here's another idea. If you've been working from home, maybe you've found some extra time in your day since you're longer commuting or attending late-night meetings. So why not dedicate that time to yourself, for journaling or reading?

CAST: There is a theme in the research I looked at of finding alone time to actually have time to log your experiences. So, is there some sanctuary you can find where you can be alone with your thoughts and journal or read?

Is there some alone place - "a room of one's own" as Virginia Woolf calls it - that you can log your experiences and start synthesizing what you're feeling?

We forget so much that we learn. And there's so many thoughts that go through our heads in the course of the day. I think it's a great idea to start the practice of having a little composition book or a journal. Maybe do it digitally. And you capture what's on your mind and you capture new ideas. You capture things that are worrying you. You capture things

that are joyful. I would say in that one hour, just test out the process of journaling, if you don't do it, and see if it takes.

LOVE: Not the journaling type? Another way of getting unstuck could be taking a solo trip or passage journey. For Cast, one of these trips was life changing.

CAST: I went up to northern Minnesota 10 years ago on a silent meditation and it really helped me realize that I wanted to make a change and it was a very key part of my becoming a teacher.

LOVE: Accepting and embracing change, trying new roles, devoting time to yourself, making small bets. These are all ways to not only unstick yourself, but also propel yourself forward, into areas you might not have even imagined.

CAST: Fear and ego are two of the biggest things that hold us back. Fear of the unknown, or fear of your financial situation. Fear eating away at us makes us tentative, and probably not testing and trying things that we could if we weren't fearful. So, I think creating these small bets is a good way, trying new things at small scale. And then if they work, trying them at a bigger scale. That is a good way to test and try new things.

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LOVE: Alongside making small bets, there is a simple, everyday change you can make to help you get out of your daily rut: Get out of that Zoom room.

CAST: Oh, it's difficult. I'm now trying to move things away from Zoom. I think people get fatigued by Zoom, you know, you worry about what you're doing with your hands, and you feel like you have to concentrate every second. And I'm finding, it's better to go back to the old phone and talk to people on the phone. Also, then you can go more one-on-one versus one-to-many. Secondly, I am finding opportunities to go for walks with people. I probably have gone for, I want to say 50 walks, with people that I work with. We walk six feet apart, five feet apart, and we go on an hour walk around. Maybe you do a meeting as you walk together.

LOVE: Above all, Cast says that getting unstuck will require you to see yourself and the world around you with new eyes. And then: to act on that vision.

CAST: I think there's real power in zigging when others are zagging. Stepping out of the prevailing consensus behavior and trying new things. I've come to believe that if you

question consensus behavior, often you can find a non-mainstream opportunity in an emergent area that other people don't see yet that can be very fulfilling. My best career moves have been unconventional ones. I sort of went my own way and did something that was a little less conventional for me. And it actually ended up being the thing that I love doing the most.

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Credits:

LOVE: This episode of *The Insightful Leader* was produced by Kevin Bailey, Kim Buikema, Jessica Love, Fred Schmalz, Michael Spikes, and Emily Stone. It was written and edited by Kim Buikema and mixed by Michael Spikes.

Special thanks to CARTER CAST, and also to Kellogg's Executive Education team, who originally recorded this audio.

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We'll be back in a couple weeks with another episode of *The Insightful Leader*.