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Surviving Corporate America: A Guide for College Graduates

By Brandi Brumley

When I graduated from college I was going to run right out and be the biggest success the world had ever seen! When I landed a great job as a finance executive with a nice office, all the perks, and a lot of responsibility I felt like Superwoman. Of course, reality struck soon thereafter. Just entering my ninth month I was let go due to "less than satisfactory performance." At the time, I never saw it coming. I was devastated that they could let me go when I was doing what I thought was such a great job. In hindsight, however, I should have seen it coming when I think back to the countless times I would stroll in late or leave early, take long lunches and turn things in past the deadline. Figuring that I was such a great asset to the company I thought those little things would not matter, they could not replace me because I was Superwoman, after all. I was foolish. Now I know that corporate life is very cut throat, you can be replaced at a moment's notice if you do not stay alert to your surroundings. Aside from doing your job to the best of your ability, trying to be successful, and keeping everyone happy, you also have to maintain focus and not let your guard down. Juggling all this at a constant is not easy. I have witnessed colleagues whom have succumbed to the pressures of their difficult lives and unfortunately turned to drugs and alcohol to cope, only to end up losing everything they have worked so hard for. Some people are simply not cut out for such a fast-paced, high-stress work style.

So many of us graduate from college thinking we can just run right out and achieve the American Dream within our first year of living in the "real world," believing it really cannot be as hard as our parents keep telling us that it is. We never think that there can really be that much stress to do our jobs and keep our bosses and co-workers happy. Reality quickly sets in when the bills are piling up and the deadlines we thought we could so easily beat are well past expired.

Today's workforce is much different than years ago when a corporation consisted of 50 to 100 people. Businesses today are generally much larger, more integrated, and more competitive than they have ever been. Our own position within the company is also more competitive; every day more and more people with the same or better skills are graduating college and entering the work force along with others who were laid off from other companies. This puts more demand on us as we not only deal with longer hours, more deadlines and heavier workloads than ever before, but as we do this all with a smile on our faces to ensure we're not the next ones fired. Surviving corporate America requires more than just getting to work on time and delivering that presentation without the slightest hitch. It is a combination of all sorts of talent, skill, personality, wit, stamina, and determination to survive, succeed and stay alive.

Being amidst the corporate jungle myself for several years, I have learned a few things about how to keep my head above the water line and retain my sanity at the same time. It is not easy, but it is certainly doable. I live with pressure from my superiors daily. I have to crunch numbers and give perfect explanations of where the money is going and why, how it is that we spent so much money here and not there, and making sure it all balances out exactly how they want to see it while still creating a large profit in the end. When accounts aren't jiving or money isn't coming in as it should be I have to make sure it does. Growing a thick skin helps, because if in the end you can not pull it all together like it should, you may be in for a stern talk or even some yelling from your boss. Results are sometimes not going to land in your favor but as long as you can shake it off and move on you will be fine, and perhaps even better off for it.

Another tip for survival is to always be on top of your game. It will give you a big advantage when you have the answers to questions that may be asked after your presentation, or in the year-end financial meeting. You will find it is not so nerve-racking when you are well educated and prepared.

Keep an open mind to all advice and suggestions others may be willing to give you. This can broaden your scope of creativity and show you an edge you may not have seen otherwise. This goes along with learning the ability to "think outside the box." It never hurts to get a fresh opinion when you are drawing a blank or need a little push to get going in the right direction. A narrow-minded person is not going to get very far if they are unwilling to be receptive of ideas, and that will make that deadline they have to meet appear even closer.

Maintain a positive focus no matter what. I have found that in the past when I began to think of all the negative things, I was ultimately setting myself up to fail, and was subconsciously giving up before I should have. I created a doubt and insecurity that, in turn, created an immediate hurdle that became impossible to see over. On the other hand, when I kept a positive attitude, I was able to work things out in my favor.

Do not bring work home unless it is absolutely necessary. Home is your sanctuary, and family time is so much more precious than work. Enjoy your family and keep the stresses of work at work. Believe me, they will be there to greet you the next time you enter your office. Allow yourself a social life and go out once in a while to spend time with friends. Giving your brain a rest from work will actually help you to be successful in your career because you will have time to recharge your mental batteries. Working all the time will surely burn you out. Remember that personal time is sacred. Whether you are living the single life or are married with ten children, you need to make time for yourself. The importance of this concept cannot be stressed enough. My personal time is devoted to going to the gym. It keeps me in great shape, it helps me to clear my head and get my focus, plus there is the added bonus of having more energy throughout the day. Don't tell me that your schedule is too hectic to work personal time into your day; I get up every weekday morning at four o'clock to get my workout in. It may seem crazy to some of you but this is what works for me. I am sure you have something you love to do that you can fit in to your day, and I think you will find you will be a bit happier and more relaxed, and definitely more able to tackle the work day.

Most importantly, do not ever lose your sense of humor. I have found that having the ability to laugh during some of the most trying times can be a real sanity saver. I remember a few years ago when I was still "the new kid" in the office. I had to give my first presentation for twelve of my colleagues, including two of the big bosses. I spent weeks working on this, making sure everything was perfect so I would look like a real hot shot. That morning as I started up my presentation on the computer something definitely did not look right. Instead of different kinds of graphs coming up, a big purple dinosaur came running up on screen singing "I love you, you love me..." My nephew had used my computer after I was done and had taken my disk out and put one of his Barney sing along disks in! I was so embarrassed; I just wanted to hide under the table. Instead I laughed and started out my presentation by suggesting that perhaps we should all stand up, join hands, and sing a Barney song so that everyone would be at ease and any further mistakes would go unnoticed. Luckily it worked in my favor because it broke the ice, made everyone relax a little and the meeting went really well. Of course for a while afterwards I could not walk down the hallways without hearing someone begin to softly sing the Barney song.

You can conquer corporate America if you utilize all of your skills, talents, and abilities. Above all, make sure that you are not neglecting your personal needs in an attempt to become some sort of Superman or Woman. Jobs will come and go, but you must ensure that you take care of yourself. No job is more important than you are.

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