



Andrew Garner
The bigger picture: how to succeed

The very first career management lecture I ever presented for MBA students more than two decades ago set a precedent, which has served its purpose quite well ever since

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Following the introduction by the dean of Manchester Business School, I offered my thanks and then invited a volunteer from the audience to come down and challenge me to Indian wrestling this is a test of physical strength in which two people arm wrestle to see who's the strongest.

It was abundantly clear then, and the reaction has been the same ever since, that the audience thought: 'Whatever this guy's smoking, he ought to stub it out!'

However, I persisted. Eventually, typically, a tall Australian would emerge from the audience thinking: 'This man's old enough to be my father, I'll nail him'. I acquainted somebody in the front row with the rules, invited that same person, on the count of three to let the battle commence, and when the count got to two, I kicked my opponent's shins, forced his arm over and won the contest!

The moral of the story is straightforward. Think about it. It is inconceivable that I would invite such an opportunity without there being an ulterior motive, but nobody in the audience (and these are supposedly some of the smartest people on the planet) saw through my motive. I still pull the same stunt and it still works. Most people fall for it. The lesson is always look at the big picture.

Most MBA students arrive at business school to outdo their erstwhile graduate peer group, failing to realise their new competitors are sitting alongside them.

The same is true for accountants. The pursuit of professional qualifications is a natural component of being judged to be a professional. The mere possession of qualifications, however, takes you no further once you have got them.

This manifests itself in another context. In the early stages of a career, performance within a task, role or project is inevitably a key determinant of upward progress. The closer you get to the top, however, actual measured performance ceases to be of any great relevance. For those accountants who are seeking the ultimate goal of becoming a plc chief executive, performance as a finance director is not going to be enough to convince a board. Communication skills, people management, strategic insight and, at times, bravery are going to be much more important.

Think of arm wrestling, and let it be a constant reminder of the competition that you face to fulfil your ambitions.

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