Getting Through the Second Glass Ceiling
What you Really Need to Know for 21ˢᵗ Century Career Success
Belonging

We begin in the way that every group begins in the 21ˢᵗ century – a group selfie!

What can we learn from this? That we all have an innate need to belong. As a social species, our survival depends on our ability to belong to a group, and throughout our lives, we allow the needs and demands of the group to be more important than finding our own path.

As an executive coach, the most common issue that clients face is fundamentally caused by failing to identify and follow their own path in life.

Finding your path

Look back over your life. You have followed a path that has led you here, now. We have each followed a very different path in life, yet here we all are, together for this short time.

Working in pairs, tell your partner about a few times in your life where you felt that you were in exactly the right place, doing exactly what you were meant to do. Times when you felt a sense of purpose, a feeling that you were 'on track'.

Your partner will mark these times and their corresponding dates on a piece of paper like this:

These points will connect in a straight line:

1996   1998   2010 2012   2016
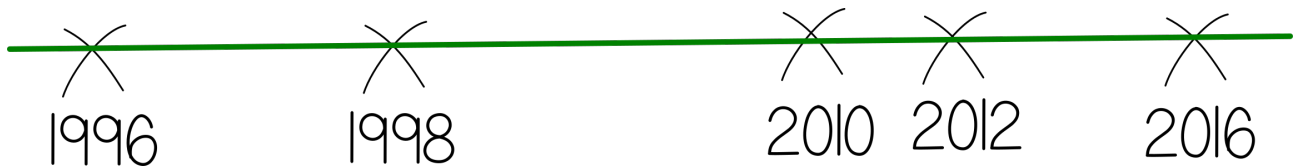
Now tell your partner about a few times in your life when you felt like a square peg in a round hole, maybe times when you realised you were doing what someone else wanted, but it was absolutely wrong for you. Times when you felt a sense of being out of place, a feeling that you were definitely "off track".

Your partner will mark these times and their corresponding dates on the piece of paper, and you'll tell them which side of the line to place the mark, and how far away from the line:

1997   2015

1996   1998   2010 2012   2016

2004

2011
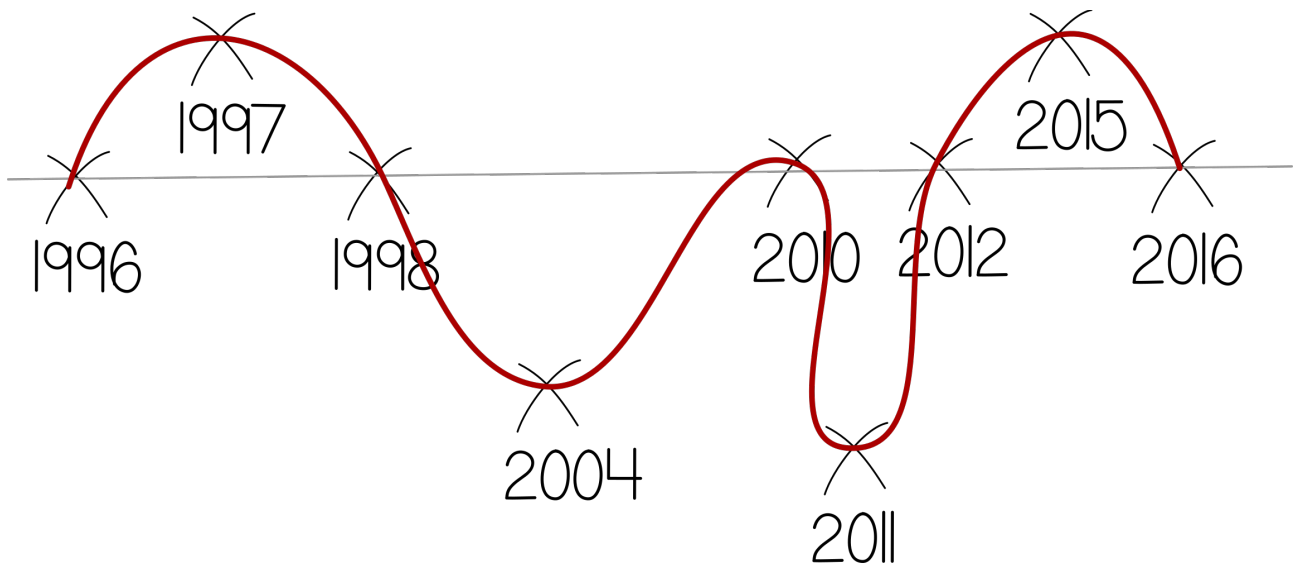
What does this tell you?

The first glass ceiling

The Dunning-Kruger effect is "a cognitive bias in which relatively unskilled persons suffer illusory superiority, mistakenly assessing their ability to be much higher than it really is. Dunning and Kruger attributed this bias to a metacognitive inability of the unskilled to recognize their own ineptitude and evaluate their own ability accurately. Their research also suggests corollaries: highly skilled individuals may underestimate their relative competence and may erroneously assume that tasks which are easy for them are also easy for others." (Wikipedia)

In other words, stupid people don't know that they're stupid, and smart people know that they're not smart.

I'm sure you've heard of 'the glass ceiling', an invisible barrier in organisations which prevents people from being promoted past a certain point, based on factors such as their education, race, sex, religion and so on. I want you to think of this as the first glass ceiling, and for you to realise that, in this modern age, there is a far more powerful barrier than prejudice.

Every culture has its own rules for promotion, such as results, leadership qualities, taking on tough assignments, politics, power or relationships. The first glass ceiling holds back two types

of people - those who do good work but don't want to 'play the game', and those who have figured out the game but don't want to do the work. For example, in a culture driven by recognition, this means people who do good work but don't 'blow their own trumpets', and people who find ways to be associated with successful projects but don't make a valuable contribution.

The Dunning-Kruger effect is relevant here, because many people get stuck at the first glass ceiling and have no idea why, because they greatly over-estimate their own capabilities. They reach their highest level in an organisation, not through measurable competency but through good PR – playing the game, politics, aligning themselves with the right people and so on.

The first glass ceiling tends to hold people at a low enough level in an organisation that they can't do any real harm – and also that they can't do any significant good, either. The problem with this is that we can't tell the difference, because we are very bad at working out what a person is capable of.

The potential paradox

Organisations invest significant time and money in trying to work out who has potential. Talent management and succession programs evaluate and assess leadership candidates to try and figure out who might be 'leadership material'. And, time and again, all of the psychometric evaluations, leadership reviews and assessment centres fail to accurately predict a person's potential.

The paradox is that potential, by definition, is a capability to do something that you've never done before. Trying to predict how a person might behave in a future scenario is difficult at best because until that person is in the real scenario, they will not truly draw upon their capabilities. The toughest of people panic in situations of fairly low stress, and nervy, uncertain people become pillars of strength when faced with a challenge.

Time and again, 'high potential' candidates fail at the interview, and external recruits are hired instead, while staff who are temporarily seconded into management positions shine in ways that no-one predicted.

An added problem of talent management programs is that the assessment of who has 'potential' is largely subjective, and therefore that potential is not in any behaviour of the candidate, it is in the eye of the beholder, the perception and prejudice of the manager who is making the assessment. Potential is not something that you do, it is what someone else imagines you might do.

What we must therefore do is assess not potential but performance.

Finding your fear

Every time you put off a decision, or a phone call, or a task, you are being driven by fear. Fear of conflict, of being judged, of being criticised, of not being good enough and so on. These fears are normal, we learn them as children, and they affect us throughout our lives.

What are you afraid of? What is holding you back?

Think about your first day in a new job or the first day you arrived at business school. When you met your colleagues, you were trying to prove something. You got up that morning and chose what to wear in order to create the 'right' impression. Professional? Laid back? Approachable? Unapproachable? You dressed and acted in order to prove something.

You went to great lengths to prove that you were not afraid.

If you're afraid of rejection, you set out to prove that you're likeable. If you're afraid of confrontation, you set out to prove that you're agreeable. If you're afraid of looking stupid, you set out to prove how smart you are. Even your chosen laptop and mobile phone prove something about you.

Amazingly, everyone can see through your pretence, they are fully aware of your fears. So why does nobody mention anything? Because they don't care. They're all too busy worrying about their own problems, and if they started pointing out yours, they risk exposing their own.

Your fear is therefore easy to identify – it's the aspect of you that you're trying to disprove.

- When you use jargon to prove you're smart, you're trying to disprove that you're stupid

- When you put others down to prove you're superior, you're trying to disprove that you're inferior

- When you display designer brands to prove you're valuable, you're trying to disprove that you're worthless

Of course, this doesn't mean that everyone who wears designer labels is afraid of being worthless, what's important is how you carry those labels.

Many years ago, I attended an evening talk by a fairly well known trainer in the UK personal development market. He walked into the room, a classroom in a small school where a local networking group held its meetings, slowly took off his jacket and lay it on the stool behind him. He made a show of folding his jacket inside out and placing it with the Armani label facing towards the audience.

Some years before that, I worked with a salesman who would behave in a similar way. A few of us were invited to a colleague's engagement party, held at his fiancée's parent's restaurant. It was a rather 'high end' restaurant in the south of England, and so the salesman had persuaded a local Mitsubishi garage to loan him a Shogun 4x4 for the weekend. The salesman arrived and, as he got out, made a show of putting on his Chanel jacket and checking his hair while admiring his Rayban sunglasses in the car's window. As he turned to enter the restaurant, a couple arrived in a Range Rover Vogue, double parked him and walked into the restaurant without a moment's pause. The salesman had to show anyone watching that he had expensive possessions, the couple were visibly well off, and didn't care whether anyone noticed or not.

I'm sure you can see the difference between those people and someone who appreciates nice things without having to 'show off'.

The irony is that everyone around you can see this; they can see through your pretence, your projection. They can see your fears and they can see your true nature. Why don't they say anything about it? Simply because they don't care. They have enough problems of their own to worry about yours. Besides, if they start drawing attention to your pretence, they risk being challenged on their own, so they prefer to keep quiet. We see the truth in others and keep quiet, they are doing the same with us.

The question we're left with is this: What are you trying to prove? And what is that telling people about you?

The second glass ceiling

Common to every culture is the problem of self-worth. Throughout a person's career, they have been rewarded for certain behaviours, such as problem solving, technical knowledge, networking, relationship-building, even bullying. The person associates their sense of self worth with those rewards, and they become locked in a cycle of those behaviours. Unfortunately the qualities that got them this far will not get them to the next level, so they face the toughest challenge of all - they must risk letting go of the qualities that they most value in themselves.

When you look back through the 'life path' that you drew earlier, do you see a connection between those memorable moments in your life and your sense of self-worth?
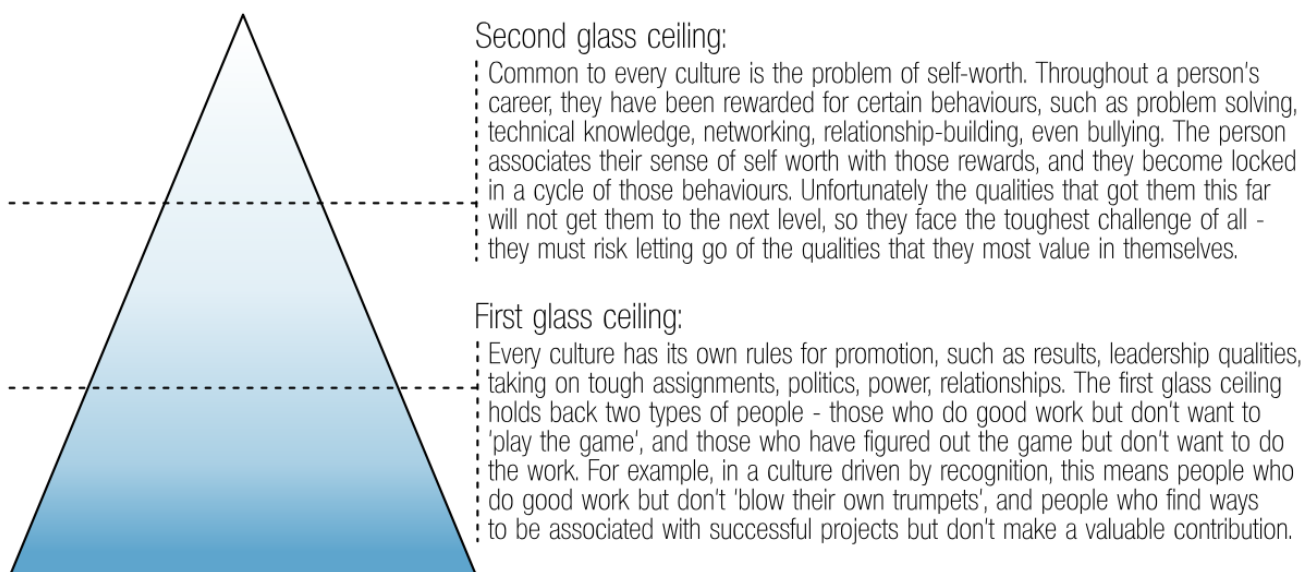
Have you ever been in a situation where you were encouraged to behave in a certain way, and then after some time, criticised for exactly that? Did it feel unfair? Did you feel undermined? Even insecure?

Self-help gurus keep telling us that we must be independent, not reliant on feedback from others, not attached to what others think or feel about us. We must find our own path in life, we must be ourselves. What they can't tell us is how to figure out who we really are. One day, you just wake up and find yourself. You just don't know which day that will be.

All of this talk about finding yourself and being your own person is, of course, misleading. We are a social species, evolved to function in groups and to experience depression and anxiety when alone. We are pre-programmed to avoid anything which would exclude us from a social group, so our fears of rejection, or abandonment, loss, conflict, punishment and so on are a very real and very important factor in our social behaviour, as is our need for status – not necessarily to have high status, but to know our status in a group.

We behave in order to 'fit in', and so in our careers, we behave in order to fit in with a working culture, and that culture, or the authority figures in that culture, reward us for those behaviours, so we carry on along that path, even though it isn't the one that's right. We only know that our path even exists when we're so far off it that we feel that sense of conflict and dissatisfaction.

The second glass ceiling is not imposed by your organisation, it is created by you. You are the only person holding yourself back.

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First glass ceiling:
Every culture has its own rules for promotion, such as results, leadership qualities, taking on tough assignments, politics, power, relationships. The first glass ceiling holds back two types of people - those who do good work but don't want to 'play the game', and those who have figured out the game but don't want to do the work. For example, in a culture driven by recognition, this means people who do good work but don't 'blow their own trumpets', and people who find ways to be associated with successful projects but don't make a valuable contribution.

Your need to fit in causes you to behave in certain ways in order to win approval. Over time, you become genuinely good at certain things. I've coached a senior manager who enjoys tackling complex projects such as large scale technical integrations, business mergers and so on. But his capability in such projects is a by-product of something else – his need to isolate himself in order to avoid confrontation with people who might be displeased with him. Locking himself in his office to work on a proposal or read a contract is a perfect cover story. Isolating yourself is a natural reaction to a threat, but in reality he is not being threatened. His past experiences in life make him expect confrontation, and in avoiding contact, he causes conflict by introducing delays into business activities that depend on relationships.

The nature of your brain is such that you will become good at anything that you practice. You can't not. And if you practice failure, you'll become good at that too.

The 'second glass ceiling' is very common with technical managers. Their skills in product design, or software, or law, or accounting principles mean that they get promoted to a first level management position, where their technical skills allow them to manage a group of technical people. This is partly based on the idea that if you don't know what your team are talking about, they must be lying to you.

The technician has been rewarded throughout their career for their technical skills, so they have created an implicit link between those skills and their own self worth. When a technician seems to get disproportionately agitated during a technical debate, this is why. By questioning their technical knowledge, you are questioning their self worth. It would be like someone telling you that you are worthless, useless, undesirable.

The technician therefore stays in their comfort zone and gets stuck at an organisational level where they can have their self worth boosted by technical tasks.

The biggest problem with being a technician is this: you *are* one.

Whatever you currently know how to do becomes your area of expertise. It doesn't have to be overtly technical, it's the connection between knowledge and self worth that's the problem.

Anything that you do to progress on from this level makes you feel uncertain, insecure, even frightened. Within months of a promotion, you'll have retreated into your comfort zone, and you'll be doing the job of people 'beneath' you because that's what makes you feel good about yourself. You'll be 'helping' your team, working on their projects and totally undermining them. They'll feel worthless and under-utilised, but at least you'll be happy.

After a few more months, your team's performance will drop and you'll start to get turnover in your team. You'll kid yourself that they just don't have the level of skill required, and you keep having to do their jobs for them. You'll hire replacements who have a lower level of skill and experience so that you can 'mentor' them, because you know best.

While all of this is happening, the world has moved on and your technical knowledge starts to become out of date. You begin to wish you had stayed in a technical job. You get moved into a 'special projects' role which is a demotion in all but job title and pay. But at least you feel safe again.

Old people are well known for their 'in the good old days' nostalgia, but the reality is, we're *all* stuck in the good old days. We all hold onto our pasts as a way of defining our futures.

We are held back by the things we value most about ourselves. To move on, we must let go.

Breaking through

I'm sure you can see the problem. In order to push through the second glass ceiling, you have to leave behind everything that you value most about yourself. It's not your fault; employers have created this dependency by explicitly and implicitly rewarding you for your technical knowledge. They have rewarded you just like you would reward a job for performing a trick. "Sit!" and you get a treat. "Write code! File accounts! Hit sales target! Good boy!"

Once you can acknowledge how this connection has been created, you can begin to break it. You can begin by recognising the times in your working life when you did something beyond what you were contracted to do, maybe you did more than you wanted to. Maybe you worked extra hours or took on extra responsibility. What made you do that? What was the need in you that was served by your compliance?

That need is driven by fear.

Your inner fear is so powerful that you protect it, every day, and you've spent so long protecting it that you've forgotten that it's there. But every so often, when you respond to something much more aggressively than you should, or something affects you much more deeply than is reasonable, you get a reminder that the fear is there, deep within you.

We're not born this way, but it is something that we learn very quickly.

The rewards of our careers make us associate certain behaviours with a sense of self worth, so the more we engage in those behaviours, the better we feel about ourselves, and the more we insulate ourselves from that fear that I mentioned.

When we're pushed out of our comfort zones by external events such as a promotion or change in job function, we feel the pressure of that fear, guiding us back into the safety of social compliance.

Fitting in might feel safe and easy, but for us as civilised, evolved humans, it is at odds with our need to be special, to be unique, to create, to make a mark on the world, to be seen, to be known, to leave a legacy.

This is our fundamental contradiction. We want to fit in and stand out, at the same time.

In order for something to have worth, two things are necessary; a valuer, and a value system. Whether we measure value in Euros, or gold bars, or time saved, or aesthetic pleasure, we place a comparative value on everything and everyone in our lives. This is the paradox of the self-worth that the personal development gurus talk about – it's actually not possible to value yourself, because that would make you both the valuer and the object to be valued. You can be one or the other, not both.

In any society, we judge and are judged by others. That's not something to fear or reject, and in fact, people who reject judgement are simply trying to protect themselves from what they fear will be an unpleasant judgement. The person who says, "I don't care what other people think about me" cares very much. They just don't want to get hurt.

To break through your fears and explore outside of your comfort zone first means acknowledging those fears. You can't change what doesn't exist, so denying your fears only leaves you at risk of exploitation by others. Throughout history, con artists have been highly skilled at recognising people who deny their own weaknesses.

Our value is created in the minds of others, and therefore our sense of worth is dependent on

feedback from others. When that feedback is, "You only got 99% in your exam? Why couldn't you have got 100%? I bet the boy next door got 100%", we learn that whatever we do isn't quite good enough. The problem is that for most things in life, there is no simple marking system, so we don't actually know what constitutes 100%. What would be a 100% job? What would be 100% of your potential? Who would be 100% the right partner for you? What would make your children 100%?

As a student, you take the test, you don't mark it. You don't rate your own performance. As an athlete, someone else holds the stopwatch. If you're always looking over your shoulder at the other competitors, your focus isn't on giving your best.

Breaking through the second glass ceiling isn't about being the best, and it isn't about being better than your competitors. It isn't even about being better than you were yesterday, because we cannot set out to improve anything – improvement is a measure, not a target. Even so, you try to improve things in your life every day.

Breaking through means being prepared to do something different and see what happens.

To improve or perfect something requires two things; a standard and a measure. You compare something that you're working on to a standard, and you make adjustments to minimise the differences. You can't ever recreate the standard exactly because your measurements will always contain errors. The standard will always be unique, as will your reproduction. However, you can recreate something close enough to the standard for the intended purpose.
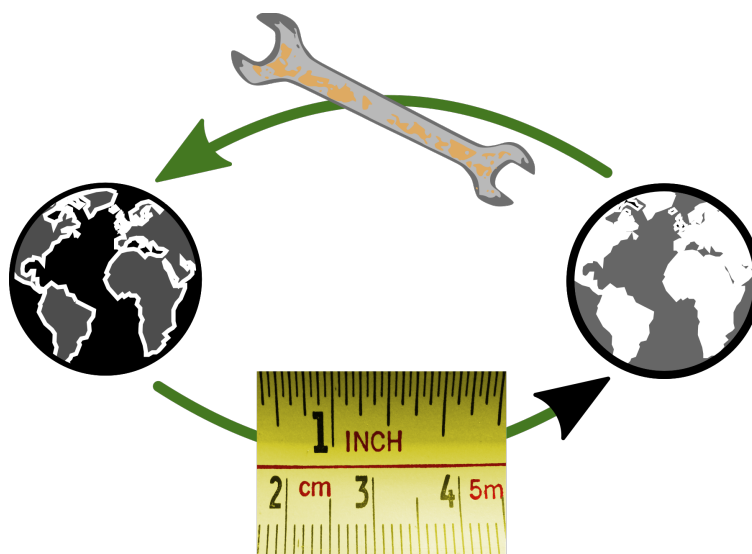
Many people try to be perfect. They set unrealistically high standards for themselves, but perfect is not an end state, it is a process. Those standards are not even their own, they are inherited from parents and teachers who regarded any achievement as being 'not good enough' without being specific about what 'good enough' means or how to measure it. This starts with judgements about academic performance and leads to judgements about career and life choices. "I just felt you could have done better", says the parent who wants more for their children.

You can only ever do what you do. Doing the *right* thing is a matter of perception, doing *something* is all that really counts. In reality, you can never have done better, you can only have done different. You have no way of knowing how that would have worked out.

Making changes is all that matters. Do those changes become improvements? We can only know that when we look back and measure the effects of those changes.

As humans we have the ability to predict the future, which is very important when we're crossing a busy road or catching a ball. However, we also try to predict what other people will do, which is dangerous because people are not simple physical objects without free will.

We are defined by our relationships with others. We are brothers, sisters, fathers, mothers, sons, daughters, managers, employees, coaches, clients, trainers, teachers, students. And yet being defined by those relationships cannot mean that we are limited by them.

As an adult, you know that feedback from others is not always honest, sometimes they have an agenda. Even your parents had an agenda – to protect you, to save you from the mistakes that they made, but in so doing, they recreate those mistakes in another generation. You can be constrained by that, or you can choose to break free and follow your own path, which ultimately is what parents want for their children anyway, they just want them to be safe at the same time. Fit in and stand out.

We assign our own worth based on feedback from others. We have to stay true to what we want for ourselves, and when we value ourselves, others will learn how to value us.

Look back at the path that you drew for yourself. When you take the 'on purpose' line and extend it forwards into the future, where does it lead you?
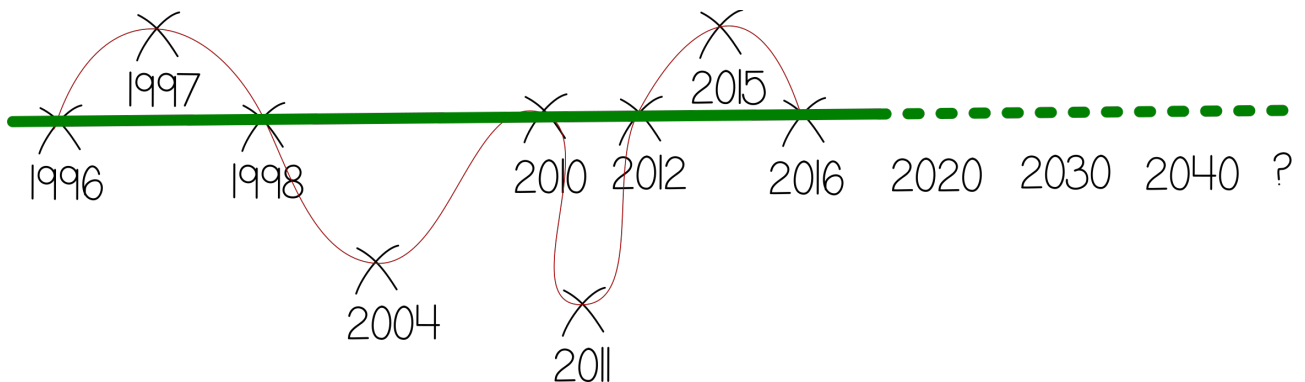
That's where you have to focus.

You're on a journey, and that journey has never been travelled before, by anyone. It is your path, it is unique, you are unique. No-one has ever lived your life before, made your mistakes before, learned your lessons before. We learn nothing from success in life, we only learn from failure, because success only teaches you to carry on doing what you're doing. Failure teaches you that there was more to do, more to think about, that the world wasn't exactly the way you thought it was. Success doesn't come from having perfect plans, it comes from being open to feedback and making changes, fast. Success doesn't come from prediction, it comes from adaptation.

Getting through the second glass ceiling means that you have to take a risk, and it's possibly the greatest risk of your life. You have to let go of the things you most value about yourself – your history, your knowledge, your skills, all of the things that you have been rewarded for throughout your life. When you let go of everything that you were, you risk walking an unknown path, running off the edge of the map. The past is safe, but it's also limiting.

When you let go of what you were, you can become more than you ever imagined.