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Get out of a career rut

Bestselling author Rick Smith tells us how to take 'The Leap'.

By Nadira A Hira

NEW YORK (Fortune) -- Rick Smith likes to tell stories, and none more than the time his doctor happily announced to him after a routine physical, "Rick, you're completely unremarkable!"

Looking at Smith, one can appreciate the doc's point of view: With his booming laugh, floppy hair, and impressive frame, Smith appears to be both the picture of health and a dead ringer for every nice, middle-aged, Midwestern gym teacher I ever had. Everything about him screams regular guy, and that, it turns out, is the quality that has defined Rick Smith's career.

But perhaps not for the reasons you think. "Diagnosis: Ordinary" may have been an ill-advised attempt at medical humor, but for Smith, it was an all too apt description -- of his professional life. And recognizing that rut spurred him to get himself out of it.

He took on a big research project at his firm, executive search company Spencer Stuart; turned it into the 2003 national bestseller "The Five Patterns of Extraordinary Careers," written with fellow recruiter Jim Citrin; promptly got fired once it became clear he was far more engaged in authoring than in headhunting; and used that opportunity to launch his true labor of love, World 50, a global network for senior executives.

That leap -- the incredible trajectory of seemingly unlikely events that took Smith from lackluster to thought leader -- is the basis of his new book "The Leap: How 3 Simple Changes Can Propel Your Career from Good to Great," out today.

And it's based on Smith's fundamental notion that a normal person -- a person like him -- doesn't have to suffer in indefinite obscurity unless he wants to, as demonstrated by everyone from Bill Gates and Live Aid founder Bob Geldof to Unilever SVP Silvia Lagnado, who launched Dove's "Campaign for Real Beauty." (There's also a fair amount of industrial psychology, theories of brain evolution, and a discussion of Aristotle's "Invitation to Philosophy" by way of evidence -- and all written in Smith's lively, conversational style -- but you'll have to get the book for that.)

However encouraging the anecdotes, though, unrutting oneself is difficult at any stage of life, and it poses a particular challenge for us Gen Yers, who -- faced with today's down market and our own high expectations -- can quickly find ourselves stuck. So just how can Yers take the leap?

1. Beware the "right" path. One might think that, given the plethora of career options available to college grads these days, we'd be excited to explore a few. But too many of us enter the workforce with that perfect plan in mind -- doctor, lawyer, um, I-banker.

"People think there are such a finite set of assumed right career paths," Smith says, "and they sort of judge each other by how well they're all doing on that same path. But that set path is right for maybe 1% of the people, and even if you get that right job, it might not be right for you."

So focus instead on figuring out what fits you best, and realize that the recession may actually be an advantage. As Smith puts it, "The bad economy doesn't let you fool yourself for another 10 years."

2. Do the work. It's hardly a shock that transformation takes work, but just how much can sometimes surprise us.

Most people don't discover their calling in a flash, and even those who think they have can end up in trouble. So rather than changing jobs -- which Smith calls the "most expensive way possible to find out about yourself" -- avoid late-breaking revelations by doing some low-risk research on your prospective paths through volunteering or seeking out mentors. And be prepared to put in some hard time, as Spanx underwear creator Sara Blakely did. Knowing she needed to lose her corporate gig but unable to decide between stand-up comedy and her own business -- yes, you read that right -- she spent months performing for pennies as a comic and pitching her crazy unmentionables idea to incredulous manufacturers.

Only one concept panned out, of course, but she needed to explore both to be sure she'd made the right call.

3. Passion equals engagement. Passions are not just things we're good at, as we validation-obsessed Yers -- myself included -- can sometimes be made to believe. And they definitely aren't hobbies; you may love listening to music, but that hardly a music career makes.

And take Smith's friend, who dreamed of opening a bed and breakfast, only to realize four months into the experiment that, while he loved the idea in the abstract, he did not in fact like cleaning up after people.

So when it comes to professional passions, look beyond what you enjoy. "If you're going to get paid for something," says Smith, "you've got to be solving a problem. So ask yourself, 'What are the problems that I'm most energized about solving?'"

4. Think trajectory. As adventurous as we Yers can be with social networking and speed dating, Smith points out that, when it comes to advancement, we get far too fixated on the next promotion.

So he recommends thinking of five ways to get promoted -- the traditional one and four others. "The whole Darwinian process is not about making the right decision," he says, "but about making many decisions till you hit on the right one." And should that promotion pan out, try to be sure you actually want it: Envision your promoted self five years down the road, write down that role's daily activities, and whether you cringe or somersault, you'll know what to do.

5. Be open -- and selfless. Before you dismiss this last bit as a hippie delusion, consider Unilever SVP Lagnado. An extremely mild-mannered middle manager, Lagnado was a "brand manager for Dove with very little power and a team of six people stuck somewhere in Dilbert land," Smith says.

But charged with a new Dove campaign and motivated by frightening statistics on female self-perception, Lagnado became convinced the ads ought to be about real women with real bodies. To enlist reluctant senior leaders, her team taped executives' daughters talking about their own body flaws and presented the tape to shocked silence and tears. What started out as a selfless notion is today an iconic campaign -- and Lagnado is now in charge of Unilever's most important brands.

But there is perhaps no better example of leaping than Men Without Youth -- Rick Smith's garage band. As his research started to show real patterns, Smith wondered where else he could apply it, and naturally, he settled on his "local band of dads," who played parties in Atlanta but were admittedly "not that good."

Pondering if the band could make the leap, too, Smith shot a joking e-mail to a promoter he'd met in passing long before. And last January, Men Without Youth opened for Lynyrd Skynyrd in front of 1,200 people.

It was so unexpected that, two months after the gig was booked and practice had begun, the band's lead guitarist still didn't think Smith was serious. "The point is that we had no right to aspire to that," Smith says, "but once you open yourself to the possibility, it just happens; the path starts to reveal itself."

For more on "The Leap," and to take Smith's new "Primary Color" career assessment test, visit leapbuilder.com.