



Welcome to the real world!

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I'm assuming a lot of readers have full-time jobs, so many will no doubt be familiar with what I'm about to say.

In my faculty role, however, I often run across students who have never had that elusive first "real" job. Many are employed on campus or have other part-time jobs, but as most of us know that's not the same.

In my never-ending quest to prepare them for what lies ahead, here are ten truths I tell them they should be ready to face once they walk across that stage and step into the proverbial real world.

First, take a deep breath and close your eyes for a moment before reading the next sentence:

Life is not fair; never has been, never will be.

This is something you need to get used to early on in your career. The idea of a level playing field is a fantasy perpetuated by those who have an advantage - and make no mistake, the privileged will do whatever they have to do to maintain their edge.

Never stop fighting for what's right, but realize it's always going to be an uphill, often losing battle.

Second, recognize that it's usually not what you know, but who you know that counts. Yes, your education will hopefully provide you with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful in your chosen occupation.

But it's relationships that matter. You should be cultivating those at every available opportunity. Take full advantage of the apprenticeships, field experiences, and internships embedded in your program of study.

Third, once you are gainfully situated in that first job, don't assume that everyone is your friend and wants you to be successful. Some do, but many do not. So be very careful who you align yourself with during those critical first few months.

If you get in with the wrong crowd, your future opportunities within the organization will be severely limited.

Fourth, remember that you are not your supervisor's first priority. Nor are they your friend. Most managers' loyalties lie with their overseers and not their direct reports.

And never assume what you tell your supervisor will remain your little secret.

Fifth, you can't trust your peers. Most people act in ways that further their own self-interest. Their livelihood is always more important than yours and occasionally this will cause them to do things that are not in your best interest.

Don't be surprised when someone you thought you knew lies to protect themselves.

Sixth, always get it in writing. Verbal agreements are subject to interpretation – or being forgotten altogether. Send e-mails and request responses to those e-mails. When you are asked to do something, insist that the person making the request give it to you in writing.

Be very wary of anyone who seems reluctant to answer you in a form that creates a permanent record of that response.

Seventh, remember that assessing blame is more important than solving problems. I know folks whose idea of a good day at work is getting through eight or more hours without being blamed for anything. When faced with a problem, they instinctively look for a scapegoat.

Try not to make yourself available for that purpose.

Eighth, realize that competence can be both a blessing and a curse. People who are good at what they do are often a threat to those who are not as capable, especially if they are in a leadership role.

Making your boss look bad, even unintentionally, is one of the fastest ways to give your tenure a short shelf life.

Ninth, understand that competence can also lead to being overworked. It's nice to be the first person everyone thinks of when something important needs to be done. But don't be surprised when you look up one day and realize you have twice as much on your plate as your peers who are making the same salary.

No good deed goes unpunished.

Finally, keep in mind that everyone is expendable. Don't threaten to quit if you are not prepared to quit. And don't be surprised if you are fired after you threaten to quit.

You will be replaced faster than you think - and six months after you're gone they won't even be able to recall your name.

Sad but true.

There you have it. Most of this stuff isn't covered in the interview or during orientation, but I routinely advise my students to look back over this list before showing up for that pivotal first day.

Or as one former student told me recently after about six months in his new job, "When you covered this stuff in class, I didn't really understand what you meant. But now I see exactly what you were getting at."

Welcome to the real world.



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