

Career-Defining Opportunities

Career-defining opportunities are the highly visible projects, assignments, and roles that showcase you at your best. When executed well, they can make your brand and your value more widely known, and propel your career to new heights.

As wonderful as these opportunities can be, they need to be the right ones for you. So no matter how enticing a new opportunity sounds, and no matter how persuasive the person offering it to you might be, don't immediately say yes.

Defer your acceptance until you've assessed whether the assignment will be a career-defining one.

Use the checklist below any time you're considering whether to take on a new project, assignment, or position:

- Does this opportunity reinforce the leadership strengths you want to be known for?**
- Does this opportunity allow you to deliver valuable results to your organization?**

Use these criteria to put guardrails in place, so you can consistently make great choices about what to work on.

If you can't answer yes to those two questions, then the opportunity you're considering is less likely to add a ton of value to your career. But if the assignment includes these two elements, you can wholeheartedly accept, and get ready to go forth and smash it—and add some shiny new bullet points to your resume.

Here are some additional supporting criteria you can consider, too. Does the opportunity:

- Move you forward on your chosen career trajectory
- Help you develop new skills and business acumen
- Provide you with your ideal amount of stretch
- Give you the influence you need to succeed, and adequate support from your management
- Make your value visible to your organization's leaders
- Meaningfully expand your network
- Connect you to potential sponsors

Customize your checklist

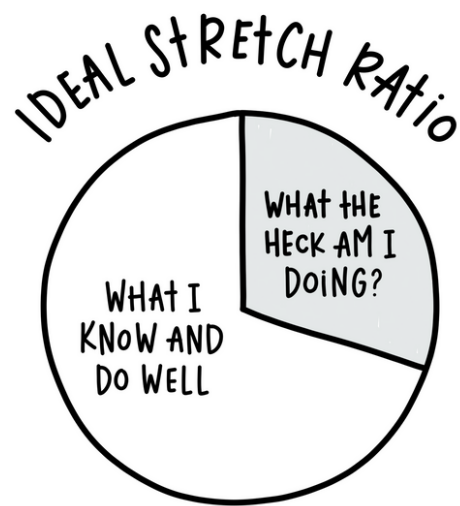
- Customize the checklist of criteria for a career-defining opportunity. Add to it or subtract from it to create a list of what's most important to you.
- Keep your checklist handy so you can use it whenever you're sizing up a new opportunity.
- Review the top three priorities you're working on right now. Do any meet the criteria for a career-defining opportunity? If not, can you upgrade one to be career defining—for example, by negotiating with your boss to be the one to give presentations to your leadership team or asking for an extended deadline so you can go after a more challenging target?



The Ideal Stretch Ratio

The ideal opportunity should stretch you without defeating you, and it should draw you out of your comfort zone yet fall short of pushing you too far too soon. Overcommit, and you not only risk burnout but also lost credibility. Beware too of staying so safe and comfortable that you fall into a rut and become stagnant or disengaged.

To avoid overstretching or understretching, Tara Jaye Frank, author of *The Waymakers: Clearing the Path to Workplace Equity with Competence and Confidence*, recommends sticking to the following rule: “Embrace a stretch opportunity that’s about 70 percent what you know and do well and that’s aligned with your experiences, your talents, and your passions.” The remaining 30 percent should be the caliber of challenge that makes you wonder, “What the heck am I doing?” That way, you can achieve the benefits of a career-defining opportunity without compromising yourself, your work, or your team.



- Evaluate whether you're overstretching or understretching in your current work.
- Look at what, if anything, would need to change for you to achieve the right amount of stretch.

It's OK to Say No

When you're invited to work on something that you're truly, innately inspired to take on, it's easy to say yes. Other times, your gut or your checklist tell you it's a no. And the assignments you say no to can be as career-defining as the ones you accept.

Coca-Cola retail sales leader Pamela Stewart says, "To high achievers, who are often people pleasers, the idea of saying no can be painful, but the inability to set boundaries around your time and space erodes the opportunity to attack your boldest dreams."

When you decline an opportunity it doesn't need to hurt the relationship or be the end of the conversation. To diplomatically say no, express your gratitude while providing some context.

For example, you could say: "I'm grateful to be considered for this opportunity. But, based on my schedule and other demands, I'm unable to help in this instance."

After politely declining, you can add: "Please keep me in mind for [name your ideal assignment]."

One way to both deflect the offer and position yourself as a leader is to help others stretch: "This is outside of my expertise as a [describe your leadership brand]. Have you considered asking [name a colleague]? It could be a great opportunity for her."

If you accept but also want to stretch in a different way, you can say: "I'd be happy to help out, and I can actually do more. Please also consider me for [name your ideal assignment]."