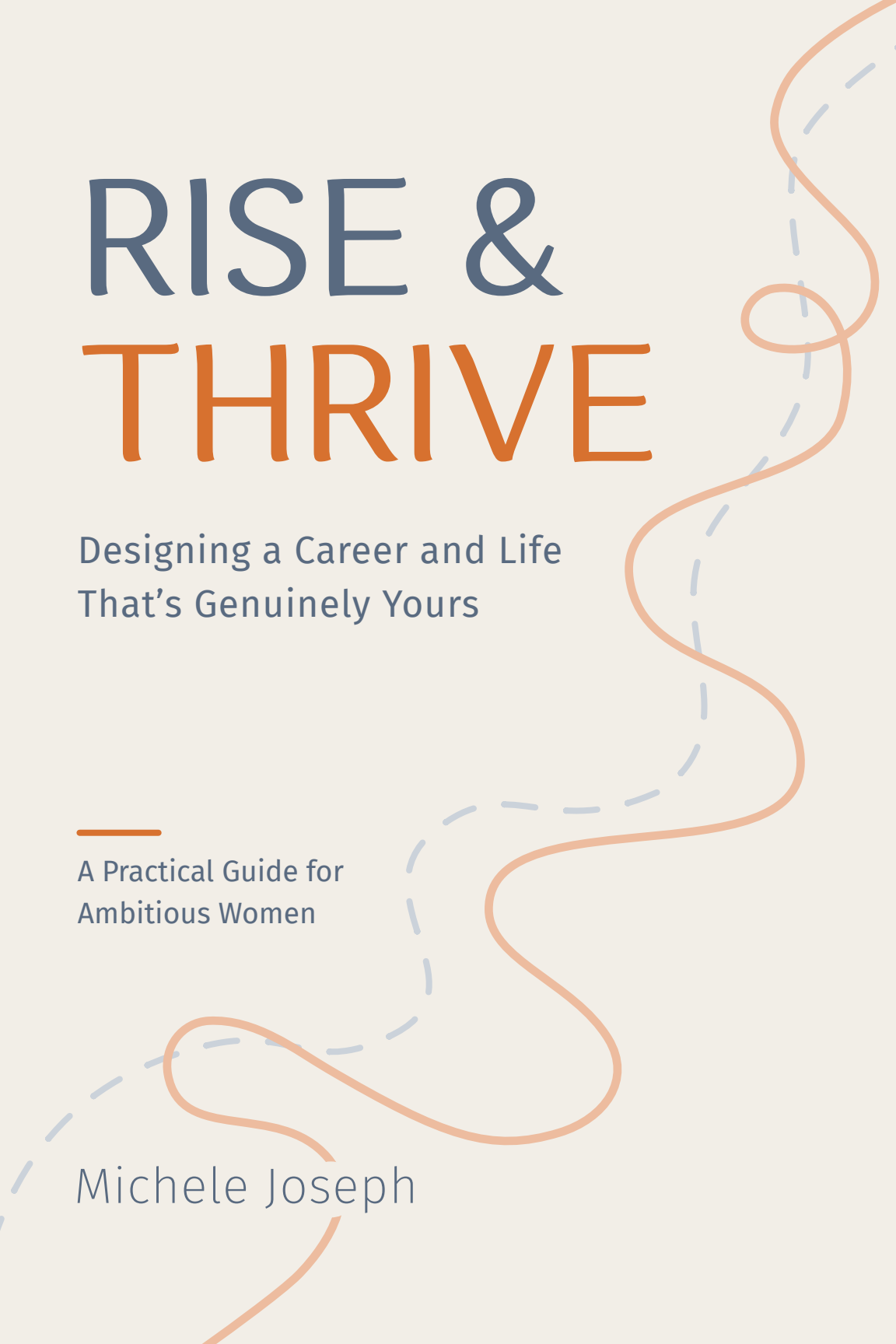


The background of the cover features two large, stylized, wavy lines. One is a solid orange line that starts from the top right and curves down towards the bottom left. The other is a dashed blue line that starts from the top right and curves down towards the bottom left, following a similar path to the orange line but with a different texture.

RISE & THRIVE

Designing a Career and Life
That's Genuinely Yours

A Practical Guide for
Ambitious Women

Michele Joseph

Introduction

Stop Waiting for Your Career to Happen to You

Maya found out about the promotion from a calendar invite. Someone else's name was in the subject line.

She read it twice before she understood what she was looking at. Then she closed her laptop and sat for a moment, doing the thing people do when they're deciding how much to feel.

She had earned this, or thought she had. For two years, she'd been the one who caught what others missed, stayed late without announcing it, and quietly took the worst parts of a colleague's project and made them work. Her manager called her dependable so often it had started to feel like a job title. She'd assumed dependable was step

one. She hadn't realized it could also be the whole story.

When she raised it with him, he looked surprised, and not in a way that comforted her.

"I didn't realize you were interested," he said.

That sentence stayed with her longer than the decision itself. Not because it was cruel. Because it was probably true. She had done the work and quietly assumed the work would speak for her. It had not occurred to her that someone might need to be told what it was saying.

Maya had followed the instructions she'd been given since her first job: work hard, be useful, don't make a scene, let your results carry the argument. Nobody told her the argument still needed a lawyer.

That instruction isn't wrong, exactly. It's just half of one.

. . .

Good work matters. So does reliability, judgment, and the willingness to do the unglamorous parts of a job well. But none of that reliably converts into recognition, advancement, or fair pay on its own. It needs a second ingredient most of us were never taught: the ability to make our own contribution legible to the people deciding what happens next.

That's an uncomfortable thing to learn, especially if you

were raised on the idea that good work should be enough. It can feel like being told the rules changed after you'd already memorized them. In a better-run workplace, maybe they wouldn't need to. A sharp manager would track what you contribute, ask what you want, and clear a path toward it without being asked.

Some do exactly that.

Most are stretched too thin to notice everything, including you. A manager can value you and still misread you completely; see the finished report and miss the five dead ends you worked through to get there; and assume that because you're steady in your current role, you must be content to stay in it.

The organization around that manager is even less orderly. Decisions move on timing, visibility, who's in the room, who's owed a favor, and who never learned to ask. The person who presents the recommendation gets remembered. The person who spent three weeks figuring out what the recommendation should be often doesn't. The work that keeps a team functioning, the notes taken, the new hire coached through her first bad week, the conflict smoothed before it became a story, tends to make you needed without making you promotable.

None of this is an argument for becoming less generous or less useful. It's an argument for finding out, deliberately,

whether your effort and your career are pointed in the same direction. That question is where this book starts.

Not with volume. With attention.

You'll need to know what you bring, and whether the people around you know it too. You'll need relationships that exist before you need them urgently. You'll need to tell the difference between being valuable and being endlessly available, and to understand enough about how decisions get made to advocate for yourself without pretending you did it all alone.

You'll also need to decide, honestly, what you're working toward. That sounds obvious. It rarely is.

Ambition doesn't come in only one shape. For some people it means a bigger title and a bigger number on the offer letter. For others, it means going deep into a craft, building something of their own, or getting to a place where work stops eating up every evening and weekend. You might want influence without managing twelve people. You might want security more than you want prestige. What you want may not be what you wanted two years ago, and it may not be what you want in three.

A career is long enough to have seasons. Some will call for risk and visible stakes. Others will call for steadiness because caregiving, illness, grief, or simple exhaustion has

changed what you can carry. A quieter season isn't a failure of ambition. Sometimes it's what keeps ambition alive long enough to come back.

The trouble is that most of us inherited a definition of success before we were in any position to question it. A bigger title, a bigger team, more impressive letterhead. The next rung looks like the right rung mainly because everyone around us agreed to call it that. Years later, some people discover they've become extremely good at climbing toward something they never chose.

This book takes your ambition seriously. It will also ask you to interrogate it. What do you want work to give you? What are you willing to trade for it? Which goals are genuinely yours and which did you absorb from a family, a boss, a peer group, or an earlier version of yourself who wanted something you've since outgrown?

You won't leave this book with a fixed answer, and you shouldn't expect one. The point isn't a five-year plan carved in stone. It's making the next decision with your eyes open, not on autopilot.

That kind of clarity is more important than most career advice admits, because most career advice overstates what you control.

You don't control whether your manager is good at the job.

You don't control a restructuring that erases the role you spent years earning. You can't out-communicate discrimination, out-schedule chronic understaffing, or set a boundary your employer keeps punishing you for holding. Some of what happens in a career happens to it.

A certain kind of advice turns every one of these problems into a personal development project. Speak with more confidence. Manage your calendar better. Build resilience. Network harder. Improve your mindset. Sometimes that advice helps. But, taken as a whole philosophy, it implies that if you're overlooked, overloaded, underpaid, or worn down, the missing ingredient has always been you.

It wasn't. Sometimes the decision really was made without you in the room. Sometimes the problem was never your communication style; it was that someone benefited from misreading you. Sometimes the right response isn't more resilience; it's a formal complaint, a change in scope, or an exit.

Intentional career design isn't about forcing every situation to bend. It's about seeing clearly enough to know what's worth your effort, and what isn't yours to fix.

Inside that, though, there's real room to move. You can learn to describe the value you create instead of hoping it's noticed. You can find the strengths worth building further and the weaknesses that genuinely need work and

stop treating every gap the same. You can build relationships with people who will advise you, challenge you, and speak for you when you're not in the room. You can walk into a hard conversation prepared, rather than hoping it resolves itself.

You can pay attention to how decisions get made where you work and stop assuming merit alone will carry you through them. You can keep evidence of what you've done instead of trusting memory, yours or anyone else's. You can find out what the next role requires before it's posted. You can rehearse the salary conversation long before your pulse is up and someone's waiting on your answer.

You can stop treating every extra ask as proof of your commitment. You can hand off work without hovering over how it gets done. You can test a new direction in small pieces instead of blowing up your life to chase it. You can decide, on your own terms, that a role has stopped being right for you. You can retire a definition of success that was never really yours.

None of that guarantees an outcome. Together, it makes it far less likely that you'll spend years waiting for someone else to notice your work, interpret it correctly, and decide what happens next on your behalf.

Most jobs will train you in the mechanics: the systems, the tools, the compliance modules, the technical standard for

good work. Almost none will train you in the parts of a career that move it forward.

Nobody teaches you how to disagree with someone more senior than you. Nobody teaches you to make your contribution visible without hoarding credit that isn't only yours, to read vague or contradictory feedback, or to build a professional relationship that isn't secretly a transaction. Nobody tells you how to notice that you're carrying an unreasonable share of the invisible work, or how to recognize the line where a hard stretch turns into an unsustainable pattern.

Most of us learn these things the slow way, by getting them wrong first. We stay quiet in the meeting and compose the perfect response on the drive home. We take on work that flatters our reputation for helpfulness but teaches us nothing. We wait too long to raise the promotion, and too long again to raise the resentment underneath it. We mistake being needed for being valued, right up until we can't anymore.

This book is an attempt to uncover that hidden curriculum.

It won't hand you a script, because no single script survives contact with every workplace. What sounds direct in one culture sounds abrupt in another. What works from a director's chair can backfire from a junior one. Instead, it offers ways of thinking through a situation clearly enough

to act on it, whatever your industry, your seniority, or your particular mess of circumstances.

You'll start with what you bring. Before promotion, visibility, or leadership come up, we need to separate your worth from your output, because without that distinction, every review and every rejection starts to feel like a verdict on who you are rather than information about a moment.

From there: strengths and learning. Not becoming excellent at everything, but knowing where you create outsized value, which gaps genuinely matter, and what should be learned next.

Then the book turns outward, toward relationships: starting a role well, building connections that don't feel transactional, and putting together a small circle of people who will advise, challenge, and advocate for you.

After that comes the harder terrain: communication, conflict, feedback, influence, a workplace that keeps changing its leadership out from under you. This is where competence is no longer sufficient on its own, because other people and their interests are now part of the equation.

Later still: visibility, reputation, promotion, money. Not to teach you to perform with a confidence you don't feel, but to help you say plainly what you've accomplished, so no

one has to guess.

Then leadership, and the uncomfortable fact that the habits which made you excellent as an individual contributor can quietly become the ceiling on what your team, and you, can achieve.

The final section returns to the larger question beneath it all: what you genuinely want. Sustainable work, flexible planning, pivots, side projects, knowing when to leave, and the complicated feelings that come with wanting more. The book ends where career advice probably should have started, with your own definition of success, decided by you.

You can read this front to back or open it wherever the problem is loudest right now. A difficult manager doesn't get easier to work for because you haven't yet done the exercise in chapter two.

But the chapters talk to each other more than they first appear to. A stalled promotion is sometimes a visibility problem wearing a different name. A time-management problem is sometimes an invisible-workload problem. The urge to quit is sometimes a need for a different job, and sometimes a need for a boundary you haven't set. What looks right for you today may not be what you need in three years. Come back to the exercises when your circumstances change, because they will.

For now, start where you are, not where you think you're supposed to be. You can be doing well and still feel unmoored. You can know exactly what you want and have no idea how to ask for it. Your career can look impressive from the outside while feeling less and less like something you chose. Maybe you've simply been too busy being good at your job to ask where it's taking you.

That's a fair place to begin.



Your Rise

Before you go further, take a few minutes with these. There's no score, and no version of this you need to get right.

Can I explain, in plain language, the value I bring to my current work?

Do I know which of my strengths I want to use more, and which I'm tired of relying on?

Do I have people in my life who advise me, challenge me, and speak up for me when I'm not in the room?

Can I hold a difficult workplace conversation without avoiding it or over-preparing it into paralysis?

Do the people who make decisions about my future truly understand what I contribute?

Does my work currently support the life I want, or quietly compete with it?

Do I know what I want next, even roughly?

If I decided to change direction, would I know where to start?

Answer these again at the end of the book. You're not looking for a better score. You're looking for what's changed, and what hasn't.

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Maya's promotion didn't come back around because she finally understood what had happened to it. Nobody appeared with an apology and a better title. Her disappointment stayed real, and it stayed hers.

But something else happened. She stopped filing the decision under proof that she wasn't good enough. She asked, directly, how the choice had been made. She started keeping a record of what she was doing and what it was producing, not for anyone else yet, just so she'd stop having to reconstruct it from memory later. She had a few

honest conversations outside her own team. She let herself consider that her next real opportunity might not come from the people currently deciding not to give her one.

Her career didn't turn around overnight. That was never really the change.

The change was that she stopped waiting for someone else to name her ambitions for her and tell her what came next.

That's where we start.