ANGRY DAN'S GUIDE
TO MILITARY-CIVILIAN TRANSITIONS

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1. THE TRANSITION MINDSET

Whether you decided you were finished with the military, or the military decided it was finished with you, you have to be a peace with leaving. Nothing will derail a civilian transition faster than an unhealthy transition mindset.

What is a healthy transition mindset? Consider Joe, who left the Navy after six years of commissioned service. He never intended to make the military a career, although he wasn't entirely closed to the possibility, either. As he neared the end of his initial service obligation, Joe thoughtfully assessed the extent to which further military service would enable him to meet his long-term career objectives. He wanted to attend business school and possibly run a company one day. While he'd had a very positive experience as a Naval Officer, he concluded additional time spent in uniform would not gain him the skills and experience needed to achieve those things he desired in a private-sector career. So, he left the Navy, *and never looked back.*

Joe was admitted to a top-tier MBA program, went on to become a junior partner at a leading management consultant firm, and today is next in line to succeed the CEO of a publicly traded company. What explains his success? Importantly, Joe never attempted to project his military experience onto his civilian life. He understood the two were fundamentally different worlds, each with its own unique joys and frustrations. Joe skillfully managed his own expectations, knowing some things about life in the private sector would thoroughly frustrate him, just as life in the military had from time to time. But he took those frustrations in stride. He maintained a positive, future-oriented outlook and refused to indulge in thoughts of, "Back in the Navy . . ."

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Joe remains proud of his military service and is grateful for the role it played in making him the success he is today. But, upon transitioning, he closed that chapter of his life, put the book on the shelf, and went on to write new chapters and new books. *That* is what a healthy transition mindset looks like.

Now, to understand an *un*healthy transition mindset, consider my own experience.

Members of each generation of my family had served in the Navy since World War I. When high school graduation loomed, and I required the means by which to escape the small-town Midwest, the Navy came to my rescue. Boot camp didn't particularly bother me. I'd been straightening my gig line my entire life, without even knowing what one was. Admission to Annapolis soon followed, as did a ticket to flight training upon graduation. My squadron Commanding Officer's words to me at the completion of my first tour were, "Remember me when you're an Admiral." I intended to spend 40 years in the Navy.

Then, during the shore tour that followed, I came to realize I enjoyed wearing a leather flight jacket far more than I enjoyed flying. At a friend's urging, I applied to business schools, "just to see what might happen." What happened was I got into Harvard. *The* Harvard. The one backwoods Michigan kids like me weren't supposed to get into. How could I possibly say no? So, without a clue as to what I might do in the private sector, I dropped my letter. I decided to get out.

Business school was a generally positive experience, although it primarily taught me how little interest I had in business.

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Rudderless upon graduation, I shunned the kind of opportunities that would have put me on a path similar to Joe's and instead, naively, decided to chart my own course. What followed was a series of poor choices and misadventures that made me regret my decision to leave the Navy every minute of every day.

I continually compared every company, boss, and colleague to the idealized versions of each I'd imagined in the Navy. Nothing measured up. Not even close. To rationalize the disparity, I took frequent pleasure in lamenting the civil-military divide. This, in turn, made me the kind of chronic malcontent successful people avoided like kryptonite. I'd previously enjoyed close, meaningful relationships with people whose names routinely appeared on guests lists for White House State Dinners. Such people stopped returning my calls. I can't say I blame them.

Don't let your civilian transition be an existential crisis. Everyone's journey is different, falling on the spectrum somewhere between Joe's and my own. But if yours leans too far in my direction, stand by. You are not ready to face the private sector. Consider delaying your separation or retirement, if you're able. If not, get help. In no particular order, you will require the services of a shrink, a priest, a career coach, and a dog.

Do yourself a favor. Get your head screwed on straight *before* you contemplate a transition. You'll save yourself a lot of pain. And your family, and dog, will thank you.

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Some leave the military with credentials that transfer directly to the private sector. Doctors, lawyers, scientists, IT specialists, and other professionals needn't expend much energy to figure out *what* to do as a civilian, provided they want to continue in their respective fields. But the vast majority of us, whose military experiences do not lend themselves directly to an outside career, do. So where to begin?

First, Lower Your Expectations

Don't expect to find the same qualities in the private sector that made your military experience unique and memorable.

"Military organizations are idiosyncratic and special. Their primary 'output' is lethal force, controlled in ways that compel people to do what they don't want to do. No legitimate firm does anything remotely comparable." ("Managing Climate Change: Lessons from the U.S. Navy," *Harvard Business Review*, July-August 2017.)

Controlling lethal force is a profoundly satisfying part of the military experience. Some veterans moonlight as volunteer firefighters or EMTs in an attempt to recapture that same sense of purpose and adventure. But such activities rarely provide any lasting satisfaction.

I turned to the Navy Reserves. After six years' hard time in a corporate cubicle, I volunteered to deploy. On my final night at sea after moonlighting as the Air Boss in USS PONCE, I gathered on the signal bridge for cigars with officers from a dozen nations. We had just successfully completed the largest counter-mine exercise in U.S. Fifth Fleet history.

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I'd come to feel a real sense of brotherhood with these officers, and, for the first time in my Navy experience, didn't want the ship to pull in. The very thought of shedding my flight suit and returning to my cubicle sank me into a deep depression. As I took a pull on my Cohiba and admired the continuous blanket of stars that stretched from one corner of the empty horizon to the other, I thought, "Why can't I have *this* in the private sector?"

Because *this* doesn't exist. And you shouldn't waste a nanosecond of your time trying to find it.

The military provides a convenient, one-stop shop for every human need along Maslow's hierarchy. From food to community, from shelter to self-actualization, life in the service officers a very complete existence. It's like being in the mafia. Who were my friends back in my squadron days? Guys from my squadron. What did I do with my free time back in my squadron days? Hang out with guys from my squadron. From where did I derive a sense of purpose, belonging, and achievement back in the squadron days? From all the cool shit I got to do while deployed to various godforsaken places with guys from my squadron.

Some civilian jobs may check some of the same boxes, but most won't. You may need a hobby. You may need to do volunteer work. You may need to make new friends. Whatever the case, remember you need to build a new life, not just to find a new job.

<u>Pursue Your Passion? Puh-lease . . .</u>

Some believe the purpose of a career is to pursue one's true calling . . . to discover one's passion.

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I wish to offer a word on that: BULLSHIT!

Pursuing one's passion to land the "perfect" job right out of the military is pure folly. This was easily the single biggest, crock-of-shit pieces of advice I received. It's the crap motivational speakers and self-help authors peddle to keep themselves in business. What happens when you seek to pursue your passion while looking for that first job is you convince yourself you shouldn't settle for a whole variety of very good opportunities that would likely meet the majority of your needs. You decide you have to swing for the fences, rather than seek the eighty percent solution.

When I graduated from business school, having been fed this "passion" bullshit by professors and career services people, I was convinced that if I didn't cure both cancer and baldness in the same day, I would be a complete failure. I put enormous, unnecessary pressure on myself and had a totally warped perspective on my civilian career that took me years to correct. Mike Rowe, long-time host of the TV show *Dirty Jobs*, gave an excellent TED talk on this topic. The people he featured on his show didn't give a moment's thought to "passion," and instead went about happily doing those things most people refused to do. And many made a shit-ton of money in the process.

Thinking about pursuing your passion? Think about being useful instead.

<u>The Gifted and Talented Program</u>

You sat at a separate table and read from the sixth-grade textbook during fourth-grade reading.

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You went to a different classroom for math to learn trigonometric ratios while your classmates recited multiplication tables. You wondered why your parents made you attend summer "enrichment" courses while all your friends were at home running through sprinklers. Most of the classes you took in high school were preceded by the letters "AP." You ran for student council and won. You lettered in two varsity sports and were a team captain. You were a member of The National Honors Society. You had a speaking role in your high school graduation ceremony. Everyone's parents liked you.

You attended an elite university. You studied abroad. You made the Dean's List. You graduated Something-Cum-Laude.

And then you joined the military. You successfully screened for a highly selective branch. You endured a training pipeline with a high attrition rate. Everyone struggled. Many washed out. But you made it.

You deployed. You did important things in far-away, shitty places. Officers with stars on their collars pinned medals on you. You got all the "right" jobs.

Sound familiar? If so, you've spent the better part of your life enrolled in some version of The Gifted and Talented Program. Apart from being a smart kid, you've also enjoyed a wide, supporting cast of characters that has been working continually behind the scenes to enable your success--parents, teachers, coaches, mentors, colleagues, and commanders. You've been surrounded by the Best and Brightest, who have challenged you to up your game every step of the way. Sure, you've worked hard. Sure, you can rightfully claim you've earned your success.

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But you probably would not have had the *opportunity* to succeed without the dedicated support of a top-notch pit crew.

I didn't understand any of this when I got out. I was arrogant enough to think I was the entire reason for my success. Who needs The Gifted and Talented Program? I thought. I can make my own. Now, a dozen years removed from leaving active duty, I have come to understand two things. 1.) The Gifted and Talented Program isn't a nice-to-have, it's a MUST have, and 2.) You probably are not smart enough to create your own. I sure as shit wasn't.

You need to continue in The Gifted and Talented Program upon leaving the military for two reasons. First, until you build a personal brand that can stand on its own in the private sector, you will need executive sponsorship. Just as your Commanding Officer maneuvered you into the right jobs to give you the experience you needed to be competitive for roles farther along the Command track, so, too, do you need a boss who is actively positioning you for experiences that lead to roles of greater responsibility (and salary). I made the mistake of thinking I could do that on my own, and I was dead wrong. Worse, I had no idea what the civilian "command" track even looked like, so I accepted roles that, unbeknownst to me, actually moved me farther away from opportunities that brought with them real responsibility (and salary).

Even if you have no ambition to climb the corporate ladder and lead a business, your odds of success are greatly diminished if you don't have senior personnel in your organization who fully understand what you bring to the table, are fully invested in your success, and are willing to break down barriers on your behalf.

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Some companies offer rotational programs, by which high-potential candidates cycle through different functions in a business before landing in a management position. They're highly selective, aim to create a fast track for accomplished professionals, and provide abundant executive sponsorship. That's one version of the grown-up Gifted and Talented Program. Other versions involve firms that recruit only the most highly pedigreed candidates with extraordinary life stories (like yours) and provide them with structured learning plans, executive mentors, and an opportunity to work ridiculously long hours as they build solid-platinum resumes. Many top investment banks and consulting firms follow this model.

A word of caution on executive sponsorship: Don't let it be the only reason you take a gig. Make sure the role is otherwise structurally sound, in terms of industry or functional fit. Your executive sponsor might not be there tomorrow, and you could be left alone and exposed, with a highly uncertain future. It's happened to me twice. Executive sponsorship is indeed a great thing to have. Just don't let it be the only thing.

The second reason you need to continue in The Program is to remain surrounded by A-players. Again, don't think of this as a nice-to-have. It's a MUST have. Across the board, expect to find a lesser caliber of person in the private sector than you found in the military. Surround yourself with only these B-players, and you will soon become one. Most B-players are perfectly content to remain that way. And if you delude yourself into thinking you will change them, think again. Most likely, those B-players will eventually drag you down to their level. Corporate B-players are highly adept at dethroning A-Players.

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The easiest way not to let that happen is to avoid B-players all together. Look for companies with an up-or-out culture. Avoid organizations where wide swaths of people are allowed to sit in the same roles for decades at a time. Find companies full of people whose background and achievements impress you. This is a critical point, so repeat after me: *I will not allow myself to be surrounded by B-players!*

Bottom line, eschew The Gifted and Talented Program at your own peril. When I finally woke up to the reality that I *needed* the program, it took me ten years to find my way back to it. *Ten years*. And I consider myself lucky to have found my way back at all.

Highest and Best Use

Mr. Bill Peery; a Korean War-era Marine, successful business executive, and founder and managing director of a highly successful CEO consultancy; first taught me the concept of Highest and Best Use while I was working as a Strategic Marketing Consultant. Strategic Marketing Consultant? I still have no idea what the hell it means. But I do know it was not my Highest and Best Use.

It's a term used in real estate. Any piece of property has a use for which it is best suited in the marketplace, and for which potential buyers will pay top dollar. If you build a single-family home on a heavily trafficked plot on the major thoroughfare of a high-end neighborhood, you're probably leaving money on the table. Far better would be to build a Crate and Barrel. Or a Jamba Juice. Whatever. Recall Rodney Dangerfield's comments on this topic in *Caddy Shack*: "Golf courses and cemeteries are the biggest waste of real estate on the planet." He understood the concept of Highest and Best Use.

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The same logic applies to careers. The military affords a variety of experiences. You're probably proficient, even good, at a number of things. You drove ships AND you taught undergraduate chemistry AND you spent a year roaming the Afghan countryside building schools and handing out candy while endeavoring not to get your ass shot off.
You have all kinds of skills you could potentially apply in the private sector. The question is, Which ones should you?

I used to write speeches for the Naval Academy Commandant. It was terrific fun. There's both an art and a psychology to speech writing. Manipulating words as one would an artistic medium to achieve a specific effect with an audience was an intensely satisfying activity for me. So, when The Great Recession rolled around, and I found myself in a manufacturing job that was about to get yanked out from under me, I decided to "network" my way into corporate public affairs.

To that point, I'd only known speech writers who'd worked on Admirals' and US Senators' staffs. In both cases, incumbents typically did not desire careers as speech writers and were merely checking boxes on the way to other, more meaningful leadership roles. It was a peek into the inner circle, from which one could draw a number of valuable lessons to apply to one's later career.

Corporate public affairs was not the same. When I was eventually selected to serve as the speech writer to the Chairman and CEO, I did not become a member of The Inner Circle. No, I became what's called a "communicator." I'd inadvertently relegated myself to the lowest form of all corporate activity: Communications.

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No surprise, then, when I later asked a member of the executive office how one transitions from public affairs to a position of leadership in an operating business, he nearly laughed in my face. I now understand how absurd the question was. The field of corporate communications is populated by former sorority chicks who want to be in business, but can't do math. Communicators write company newsletters and organize town hall meetings. They do not lead businesses. Not even close.

Of all the skills I'd gained in the military, speech writing was not the one on which to build a civilian career. It was not my Highest and Best Use. As with the military, my ambition was to "command" an organization. Such a role would draw upon the widest range of my talents, education, and experience, *and* fetch me top dollar in the career marketplace. Speech writing would not get me there, nor would a role as a Strategic Marketing Consultant. Nor would most of the other roles I'd assumed since leaving the military. It took Bill Peery to help me understand that.

No Clue Where to Begin?

If you haven't the slightest notion what to do in the private sector, Richard Bolles offers a possible starting point. In his seminal work on career transitions, What Color Is Your Parachute?, he observed that all human endeavors fall into one of three categories: The pursuit of truth, the pursuit of justice, and the pursuit of beauty. While we may have interests that cross these categories, our lives' work will generally align to one. People who are chiefly interested in the pursuit of truth may naturally gravitate to the hard sciences and prefer work in research fields or academia.

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Those in pursuit of justice may be inclined to legal careers or work with non-governmental organizations or nonprofits with social-oriented missions. The pursuit of beauty is a bit broader, encompassing not only the arts, but also pursuits requiring advanced problem-solving and design skills. A simple, elegant solution to a vexing problem can be a work of beauty. A well thought org chart that places people in roles that make best use of their skills and talents can be a thing of beauty. If you truly don't know where to start, think in terms of truth, justice, and beauty.

Melissa Fristrom, Harvard Business School alumnae and career advisor, offers another potentially useful framework. She suggests one should think of opportunity in terms of industry, geography, and function. Leaving the Navy and want to say in San Diego? (Who doesn't?) Then let geography drive your job search, and figure out what trade-offs, if any, you'll need to make with respect to industry and function.

Spent your high school weekends restoring that '78 Stingray in your dad's garage? Maybe the auto industry is for you, and you're willing to be flexible as to where and in what capacity. Were you the guy who amassed a small fortune while on active duty through day trading and real estate? Do you pass time on planes doing discounted cash flow analyses? That probably makes you a finance guy, and you should focus your job search around that particular function.

The trifecta in the industry-geography-function model is to align all three in a single role. The Information Warfare Officer originally from the Bay Area who was a weekend coder and tech geek lands a job at Google.

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The political science major-turned aviator who's been infatuated with the DC scene since his Academy days lands a job on K Street with a firm whose clientele includes Raytheon.

The Senior Chief Logistics Specialist who's a life-long Packers fan goes to work running a distribution center for Amazon in Green Bay. The combinations are endless. If you can't get all three to align, get two. If you can't get two, get one.

When in Doubt, Lead

Henry David Thoreau famously wrote, "The mass of men lead lives of quiet desperation, and go to the grave with the song still in them." Nowhere is that more true than in the cubicles of corporate America. *Office Space* was not a caricature of the American workplace. It was a chillingly precise documentary of it.

And why is that? For every decent boss, there are ten shitty ones. Most civilians have only ever worked for a shitty boss and haven't the remotest idea of what it means to be competently led. In a 2015 survey, Gallup found only 32 percent of American workers to be engaged. Engagement, or the extent to which one gives a shit about one's employer, has a lot to do with one's boss. And it's awfully hard to be an engaged employee when you think your boss is an idiot.

The military is not immune to shitty bosses. But the military puts a premium on leadership most private-sector organizations don't. Sure, corporations pay a lot of lip service to it.

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They give newly minted supervisors brochures entitled, "You Are My Leader," and host off-sites for promising, young, high-potential leaders. But, despite the effort, Gene, the middle-manager from corporate audit, simply ain't going to step into the breach and lead the way even the greenest of Lance Corporals instinctively will.

So, what? So, LEAD ON, my friend! Don't take a job as an individual contributor. Most separating veterans have enough generic leadership experience to qualify as a front-line supervisor somewhere. So be that one-in-ten, good boss. If you apply even the most basic leadership principles you learned as a Naval Academy Plebe to the civilian workplace, you will be amazed at how positively people will respond.

Go shine a light in a corporate cubicle. You could literally put years back on some poor schmuck's life.

<u>False Starts</u>

No matter how complete your due diligence, you simply cannot know what an organization is truly like until you're in it. And once you're on the inside, you may not like what you find. From toxic work environments to fraudulent, even criminal, behavior on the part of company leaders, you would be amazed at how the organization for which you go to work differs from the one to which you were recruited. If you find yourself in such a circumstance, you have a choice: Gut it out or punch out.

It's a personal decision with many considerations. On the one hand, life is short. On the other, you don't want a resume that evidences too much job-hopping and paints you as a flake.

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But while you certainly don't want to make a habit of false starts, I'd say one or two is generally acceptable.

I had three. With the first, I was shown the door after four months. With the second, I went searching for the exit within two weeks, but took three months to find it. And with the third, I lasted five and a half years before crying "Uncle!" and finally moving on to something else.

All three false starts were painful. They left me bitter . . . and smarter. Hopefully, you will never have to experience one. But don't beat yourself up too badly if you do.

3. SALARY NEGOTIATION

Upon leaving active duty, I viewed salary negotiation as a debauched exercise in self-promotion akin to prostitution. What kind of self-respecting human being would sit across the table from the nice HR lady and try to shamelessly sell himself in order to get ten percent more in base salary? My record speaks for itself, dammit! Disgusting . . .

Then I went to business school and got it in my head that all potential employers were out to screw me. Hold a hard line, the advice went. Make them pay you what you're worth. Don't leave money on the table!

This led me to botch what could have been a couple terrific opportunities. When asked about salary expectations in interviews, I answered with numbers that were so far out in left field, it was no wonder the conversations ended so abruptly. In my mind, I supposed the interviewer to be thinking, "Wow! This guy is one shrewd operator." Instead, what he was actually thinking was, "Wow! This kid's a complete, fucking idiot."

Salary negotiation was something I dreaded and frequently got wrong. No more. What I've learned is the black art of negotiating one's salary boils down to two truths: The job you seek has a certain market value, and you have a certain market value. The better informed you are of both, the quicker you will arrive at a deal both you and your prospective employer can feel good about.

Let's return for a moment to real estate. What your house might sell for tomorrow has a lot to do with what the house down the street with the similar floor plan sells for today. Comparables largely determine value in the real estate marketplace. The same is true of jobs. Employers, especially

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larger corporations, are continually scanning the competitive horizon to ensure the wages they pay are in line with those of the broader industries in which they operate.

Why? Employers don't want to place themselves at a disadvantage in the War for Talent by offering below-market-rate compensation.

Your first task, then, is to determine the proper comparables to the position you seek in order to estimate its market value. Accuracy in this task is critical, and a number of factors must be taken into account.

- Consider the industry. Investment bankers wear Rolexes. App designers wear Apple watches. Plant managers at the local UAW facility wear Timexes.
- Understand the role of geography. Don't expect the same paycheck in the Rust Belt as what someone in a similar position would take home in Silicon Valley.
- Think about the size of the company and whether it's public or private. Most large, publicly traded companies have paygrades very similar to those found in the military that are equally inflexible. Smaller, private companies may not take such a structured approach to compensation and may offer wider latitude in setting salaries.
- Consider the complexity of the role and the level of responsibility for people and assets it carries. The general manager responsible for the day-to-day activities of 300 people at four different sites and on the hook to produce $100 million in annual revenues should absolutely fetch more than the sales director with ten direct reports and a sales target of $10 million, all else being equal.

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The list goes on, but the task remains the same: Produce a short list of jobs that most closely resemble that which you seek across as many different categories as possible. This will likely require an exhaustive research effort and perhaps a little sleuthing. But it's well worth it. The more accurate your information, the stronger your negotiating position.

Your research should ultimately lead you to develop a salary range for your target role. Your next task will be to determine where you might fall within that range. And this is driven by your personal, market value.

What is that value? For starters, it isn't nearly as much as you think. The key determinant of your potential value to an organization is the amount of directly relevant experience you bring to the role. Ideally, hiring managers want candidates with a proven record of success doing exactly what the role they seek to fill entails. They want someone with long experience in the same industry, who knows all the relevant players and market dynamics, and who has effectively confronted and overcome all the same challenges the hiring organization might face. That reduces the organization's risk. Bad hires are costly, and the company wants to avoid them just as much as you.

Fresh off active duty, you will likely have almost no directly relevant experience. That may not be the case if you are already an accredited professional seeking a role in your given field, or you chicken out and take a GS job doing exactly the same thing you did in uniform. But the vast majority will be light on the type of experience that directly translates to the private sector and fetches top dollar in the civilian job market. Sorry to be the one to tell you, but "leadership" alone does not.

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So how does this all play out in a salary negotiation? Consider a recent experience. I was recruited to fill a vice president of sales position for a mid-size, industrial manufacturing company. When my interview with the HR manager turned to salary, I shared my research on comparable roles and the salary range it produced.

"Based on compensation information I found for VPs of sales of similarly sized companies serving similar industries, I estimate the market value of the base salary of this position to range between $X and $Y."

The HR manager nodded.

"Now, as you know, I have no sales experience. But I understand the company's primary interest is to fill this role with an experienced leader who will serve as a strong number two to the general manager. *That* is a role I've held numerous times before."

More nodding.

"Given that, I would place myself either at or just below the median point of the salary band for this position."

I am not a clever negotiator. Thus, my goal was less to negotiate and more to have an objective discussion on assumptions I'd made based upon my research.

When the offer came, I was quite pleased. The company offered me a signing bonus to offset the loss of short-term incentive pay I'd experience by leaving my current employer. The annual bonus opportunity they offered, based on a percentage of base salary, was lower than I had been receiving.

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When I brought this to the hiring manager's attention, she mentioned both my boss and his boss received annual bonuses at the same percentage. I chose not to press the matter. The equity compensation in the offer was significantly higher than what I had been receiving, which was quite nice. And as for base salary, the amount offered was about five percent lower than I anticipated. When I mentioned this, I was offered an all-expenses-paid, three-year lease on a brand-new Audi to bridge the gap. We had a deal.

Every negotiation is unique. But now that I've been on the hiring side of the table for a while, I understand precisely how screwed up my approach was in the early days. Companies aren't going to waste the time and money on the hiring process, only to have a candidate jump ship at the first opportunity to chase a better offer. They expect a reasonable return on the investment, which requires they offer a competitive salary. At the same time, nothing sends a stronger signal to a potential employer to "Run away!" than a candidate whose compensation expectations are totally out of whack with current, market reality.

So do your homework. And don't be that candidate.