

CareerSmart Advisor™

Strategies & Solutions for Your Career Success

A Note From Dave

After all these years, I still hear most people who are interested in a career change say they plan to “work with a recruiter” or use a job board, and these are the strategies that are going to get them to their professional goals.



When I’m talking to members who are lamenting that they answer ads and never get a response, or call recruiters and get no call-backs, or generally don’t understand why the world is not beating a path to their door, I often ask, “How did you get the job you have now or jobs that you have had in the past?”

I haven’t score over the years, but my finger-in-the-wind survey says that probably 75 percent of the time, the answer is: “I got it through networking.”

As I said, I don’t keep score when I’m on the phone or just talking with someone at a meeting, but we have kept a tally for years when members tell us they have made a change. Interestingly enough, the networking number turns out to be 70 percent, and interestingly enough, that number doesn’t seem to change very much no matter what is going on with the economy.

All that being said, we still can’t deny that we live in an instant gratification society, and advancing technology often requires more investment in hardware and software than in building real relationships. This is not a rant against the “social networking space,” as there is no question that technology has made electronic connections easy and, in many cases, very productive.

It will be interesting to see if and when “social networking” becomes the 21st century’s version of “personal networking,” as in people’s willingness to put their personal reputations on the line.

Sincerely,

Dave Opton
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Ensuring Your Place in the Succession Plan

By Marji McClure

What were some of your New Year’s resolutions? Is one of your main goals for the year to become the chief executive at your organization? Or perhaps you have decided that this is the year you’re going to lay the groundwork for your move to the top — for you, 2008 or 2009 may be the right time to move up.

If 2007 is going to be the year you take another step on the career ladder, you need to ensure that you’re part of your company’s succession plan now. Your main objectives are to prove your worth to your organization and make sure that the right people notice your talents.

Identify the Right Decision-Maker

One of the key mistakes executives make when positioning themselves to take over for their boss (or another top executive) is assuming that the individual is responsible for choosing his or her successor. In most cases, other leaders in the company are charged with naming successors; most executives don’t have the final word in selecting their replacements.

You need to identify the individuals who have the hiring power and learn what leadership skills they seek. “The key to getting on the succession plan list may involve the incumbent, but earnest seekers [should] search deeper into the system,” says Larry Lee, EdD, senior director of research and development for Houston, Texas-based Birkman International Inc. “Within every management structure is a nearly invisible group of voters. If the top slot is the objective, one has to perform informational interviews and rightfully assess the likelihood that the voters would vote for them.”

Lee says that these informational interviews can be conducted either formally or informally. But the goals are the same: to effectively identify the individuals who will ultimately name a successor and help executives determine if they are a realistic candidate for the position they seek. “If well-done, the aspiring individual can determine whether or not he or she qualifies, what needs to be done to make the grade, or if it’s folly to continue aspiring to this position,” says Lee. “For example, if the informational interviews indicate that among equally talented candidates, the one who has the best MBA pedigree has been chosen for

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the last four openings, then that information may temper, or encourage, the hopeful candidate.”

Actions Speak Louder than Words

In order for your company’s decision-makers to consider you a viable candidate for a top leadership role, you must provide proof that you can handle the responsibility. Bottom line: these decision-makers need to see results.

Take on some of the company’s most challenging tasks. “Look for opportunities to serve on and lead high-visibility projects that are important to the success of the organization,” says Scott Eblin, executive coach, speaker and author of *The Next Level: What Insiders Know About Executive Success*. Eblin suggests tackling assignments such as merger integration, new product introductions, re-engineering and reorganization projects. “The way business learns who can do the job, and who cannot, is by giving emerging stars assignments that have perplexed the organization for some time,” says Lee. “These assignments are designed to reveal whether or not the individual is composed, articulates issues well, and takes appropriate risks to improve the situation. Those interested in leadership should seek and accept every challenging assignment they can find.”

Don’t be afraid to take those risks; and don’t assume that the results achieved by you and your team members will speak for themselves. Make sure your objectives and accomplishments are well-known. “Speaking for the work doesn’t mean bragging or constantly highlighting



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When Your Team’s Plans Don’t Include You

While you are extremely aware of your own career goals and the path you plan to take, you are not likely aware of the long-term goals of your team members — especially if their plans don’t include you and your organization. Are you prepared for the day when your top talent leaves?

Unfortunately, for many executives, planning for this moment doesn’t occur until their staff members offer two weeks’ notice. One way in which you can plan ahead is to provide many reasons for your employees to stay. Work to create an environment that they won’t want to leave.

“Great people leave for the same reason great customers find other suppliers — they’ve been disappointed,” says management consultant Laurence Haughton. “Disappointment is the catalyst for defection.” Haughton relates a story included in his book, *It’s Not What You Say... It’s What You Do — How Following Through at Every Level Can Make or Break Your Company*, about Joe, a bank broker who was promised by HR new technology in exchange for successfully completing training courses. Joe completed the courses, but the new computers were never purchased; their absence was never explained. When Joe received another job offer, he left.

“Joe didn’t leave just for the money. His disappointment was the real catalyst,” says Haughton. “What the manager could have done was worry more about disappointing Joe, fixing HR’s follow-through before it hit Joe’s desk or at least giving Joe a head’s up.”

Reduce the likelihood of disappointment by keeping your staff members engaged. Make sure they are (and that they know they are) important to the organization. “Make sure your ‘A’ players know they’re ‘A’ players by talking with them regularly about their development, giving them interesting developmental assignments, strengthening their connections with other key players in the company and rewarding their good work,” says Scott Eblin, author and founder of executive leadership development firm The Eblin Group in Virginia.

Finally, keep your team productive. Larry Lee, EdD, senior director of research and development for Birkman International Inc., adds that each member of the leadership team should have an executive coach (if the company can afford it). “Good executive coaches, with a clear mandate, can help team members make good, courageous decisions that benefit themselves and the organization,” Lee says.

every little thing you’re doing,” says Eblin. “It’s more about establishing a communications context for the work and the results accomplished by your team. Start this process by declaring in advance what you’re going to do. That’s a high-risk strategy, but an effective one when well-executed. You will gain the reputation of someone who delivers on what he says he is going to do.”

Dr. Laurence J. Stybel, cofounder of Mass.-based consulting firm Stybel

Peabody Lincolnshire, recalls working for an organization that was choosing between two CEO candidates. The more competent candidate felt that he would be selected because he was more qualified than the other candidate. The less competent individual made it clear that he wanted the position and would look for other opportunities if he didn’t get it. The less competent candidate was chosen because management didn’t want to lose him. “What is the lesson of this story?” asks Stybel. “Passion and a willingness to put your tenure on the line are more attractive in the final analysis than quiet confidence once all candidates reach a certain threshold of job competence for the CEO role.”

But how vocal should you be? Eblin says that it is acceptable to openly express your career aspirations in the proper setting (such as during an annual perform-

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ance review). But it is still best to show your talents, not talk about them. “Most of the time, those who are most vocal or blatant in their ambition to move to the top are least likely to be selected,” says Eblin. Informational interviews can help executives determine which tactic to take with their company, notes Lee.

Regardless, perhaps the best strategy is: show it, don’t say it. “In healthy organizations, the top jobs go to those people who have consistently demonstrated over time that they can deliver results and build the relationships that lead to sustainable results,” says Eblin.

When You’re Not Part of the Future Plan

Even if you have a strategy in place to become the next leader of your organization, this doesn’t guarantee you’re the future leader the company wants. How will you know if you’re being passed over? Some of the warning signs that illustrate that you’re not part of the company’s succession plan, says Eblin, include not being asked to participate or lead important projects, missing an expected promotion, and feeling like you’re not in the communications loop.

Simply put: “Most bosses have an ‘inner circle’ that he or she brings in for emergency meetings,” says Lee. “If you’re not one of the ‘called,’ then you are not in the ‘active’ succession line.”

The Succession Plan Checklist

Perhaps you have decided that, in two years, you want to be president of your organization. Start creating the foundation for that transition today. Tucker Mays and Bob Sloane, principals and executive coaches for OptiMarket LLC, suggest taking the following steps in order to achieve that goal:

- Identify the important skills and experience needed to become a serious candidate.
- Independently — and after discussion with trusted friends/advisers — determine gaps between one’s abilities and what is required.
- Communicate your wish to grow to your superior and appropriate colleagues and ask for opportunities to participate in gap projects. “We counseled a VP of marketing and sales client, who lacked experience in finance and operations, to ask to be included in a project evaluating the financial merits of an acquisition or an operations initiative to improve supply chain efficiency,” explain Mays and Sloane.
- Determine if the company funds coursework in your gap areas. Examples: corporate finance, supply chain, strategic planning, operations/IT. If not, fund on your own.

Expert Resources:

- Scott Eblin, The Eblin Group (EblinGroup.com)
- Laurence Haughton (LaurenceHaughton.com)
- Larry Lee, Birkman International Inc. (Birkman.com)
- Tucker Mays, OptiMarket LLC (OptiMarketLLC.com)
- Bob Sloane, OptiMarket LLC (OptiMarketLLC.com)
- Laurence J. Stybel, Stybel Peabody Lincolnshire (StybelPeabody.com)

There are other ways in which to determine where you stand. Stybel suggests asking for management development opportunities outside of your organization (such as time to serve on a board of directors or the time to attend executive education programs). “If the company does not consider you a good investment for the future, they will communicate by failing to release the money,” says Stybel. “Money talks louder than verbal pats on the shoulder.”

If you don’t feel challenged in your position, that could be another sign that future growth opportunities are not available at your current company. “Most significantly, when you do not feel that you are growing in your scope of responsibilities, and your boss is not providing you with broader challenges, new tasks, encouraging you to take on more and more, this can indicate that you are leveling off,” say Tucker Mays and Bob Sloane, principals and executive coaches with Stamford, Conn.-based OptiMarket LLC. “Another sign is that, in comparison, your peers are getting these kinds of ‘growth’ opportunities while you are not.”

Executives who can identify with such a scenario need to avoid becoming

complacent, warn Mays and Sloane. “The best way to overcome this is to constantly seek feedback on your performance, track your own business accomplishments, and be sure that you and your boss think the same way about your upward potential,” say Mays and Sloane.

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If you find that you and the boss don’t agree on your future with the company, then it’s time to consider a transfer to a different part of the business or moving to an organization where you’re more likely to achieve your career goals. Ultimately, you have two choices, say Mays and Sloane: “Keep doing what you are doing, while recognizing that the more you become ‘type cast’ in the same role, the less likely you will ever grow out of that role; or begin to explore better opportunities outside the company.”

If you decide to seek a position at a different company, look at it as an opportunity to ultimately achieve your career goals. “Sometimes it’s necessary to move on to a new organization where you can get a fresh reputational start,” says Eblin. “It can be difficult to alter long-standing perceptions of yourself within an organization, even if the more current reality of your performance is strong. In such situations it may make sense to move on if your goal is to move up.” ■