

JANUARY 2013

Hire a Personal Board of Directors (Because You're the CEO of your Career)

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Research Report

Hire a Personal Board of Directors (Because You're the CEO of your Career)

Run your career like a business.

*Get help from smart people
from the start. You need their input
to develop a smart strategy
to make your business succeed.*

— Successful career woman

*You need to build a coalition around you
to propel your career.*

A couple of mentors aren't enough.

— SVP [big financial services company]

*Although mentors are not easy to find these days,
they still can be an invaluable asset to your career.*

Don't pin all your hopes on one.

— Jim Billington

Harvard Management Update

VICKI'S STORY

Vicki was a manager at a national publishing company in New York. She had worked in this publishing firm for 15 years, steadily climbing the corporate ladder, and aspired to be a vice president. Because she had excellent operational skills, and knew the company, the people, and the processes — and how to influence others — Vicki was asked to head up a division as co-director with a man coming in from the outside who had strong financial skills.

Vicki worked with this man for seven months in a collaborative, cooperative way, doing what she believed the company had asked her to do — to use their combined strengths to help the division succeed. She also was asked to spearhead the especially difficult task of cutting the division's expenses. She formed a group to develop recommendations to the senior executives on how expenses could be taken out of the division, including some deep staffing cuts.

Midday on the day she successfully presented her cost-cutting findings to the senior executives she returned to her office and a memo on her desk. The man who had been her partner in heading the division had been promoted to vice-president. Vicki was hurt, mad, and confused. She burst into tears.

Most of us women just put our heads down and work, work, work ... and hope that we get noticed. We don't look up often enough to strategize about our careers. It is often a surprise when male peers get promoted ahead of us. There is a lesson here: Great businesses focus on strategy, not just on execution ... and great careers must focus on strategy also. Your career is a business — and you're the CEO. You're running this business, the product is you, and you need sound advice from as many perspectives as you can get to be able to craft a winning strategy. Let other people help you. Let multiple mentors help you, not just one person.

MEET YOUR MENTOR, IT'S A BOARD

A personal board of directors is the group of people that you go to for support and advice on advancing your career. Ideally they are people who have a strong personal and professional interest in seeing you succeed. Though we call it your "board of directors," this isn't a group that ever meets around a conference table — it's just five to seven carefully selected individuals that you can rely on to strategize with you as you navigate the sometimes maze-like paths of your career.

A mentor is great to have, especially when you're first starting out. Many high-achieving women say they couldn't have gotten where they did without one. As you

Inside Secret

A personal board of directors is ...

- *5 -7 people*
- *Individuals whom I trust and respect*
- *Influential in my company or the industry*
- *People I want to learn from*
- *Able and willing to advocate for me*

A board is not ...

- *A "group" that "meets"*
- *My "lunch bunch"*
- *Responsible for my career success*

work your way into the higher ranks and take on ever-changing and more demanding roles, though, you really need more than one person to advise you, sponsor you, coach you, teach you, and open doors for you.

A personal board of directors is like having multiple mentors. Think about it this way: If you're serious about getting to the top, you need to tap into the broadest possible base of experience and insight. You need no-holds-barred advice and feedback from people who are more seasoned than you are and can view your career with some objectivity. You need to hear lots of different viewpoints. Plus, the built-in power of a board is the close attention you pay to selecting its members; in making your choices, you deliberately choose people who have the experience, perspective, and connections you will need. It's also vital to have people who care about you on your board, people who want to help you.

WHAT CAN A BOARD DO FOR YOU?

Remember Vicki? We left her in tears at the beginning of the chapter, when her co-director was promoted and she wasn't. After she dried her eyes, Vicki went about the business of getting advice from her board to work for her.

Vicki started calling some of the people on her board of directors and talking to them about what had happened. She got good advice about what to do next, and saw that she had many different options. Vicki decided that first off she wanted to go see the publisher and tell him how she felt.

The next day, she called the publisher's administrative person, who was on her board of directors and had given her very good advice before on how to manage the boss. She told Vicki to come upstairs right then to talk to the publisher — while she was still mad and hurt. Vicki mustered up her courage, went into the publisher's office, and told him why she should be a vice-president; she reviewed all the things she had done in taking on the new division and explained why she was so indignant about what had happened.

"Vicki, I didn't know that you wanted to be a vice-president!" the publisher said. "You've never told me that." He said to her, "What would you think of this?" as he handed her a memo saying that she also had been promoted to vice-president.

That promotion wasn't happenstance. Several people on Vicki's board of directors had gotten the word to the publisher the day before that Vicki was hurt and angry about her colleague's promotion. It was only then that the publisher realized that he should have made Vicki a vice-president too.

Vicki's board members not only gave her sound advice on how to deal with her situation. They also seized the moment to communicate her aspirations and disappointment to the publisher and to lobby him to promote her too. If you are thoughtful and thorough about the way you put your board together (more about that later), your board members will always be willing to help you with whatever career issues you're facing.

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Like the venerable Jedi master Yoda in *Star Wars*, your board advisors are wise people whom you want to connect with regularly to learn from, to get support from, to get feedback from about your choices and plans, to connect you to other sources of advice, and on and on. The contributions your board can make to your career are limited only by your imagination ... and your courage to ask!

Here are just a few specific things your board might do for you.

Make Connections

You already have your own network of people you talk to, share information with, and refer business to — and vice versa. Your board of directors expands your network many-fold. In fact, their networks become your networks. When you ask, “Who do you know who ...?” each person on your board can put you in touch with a new and different universe of people, connections you couldn't possibly make as quickly and easily on your own.

Linda was a talented and ambitious young tax advisor who wanted to be promoted to partner in her firm. While attending one of our business development workshops she put together an action plan to develop more new business for her firm — although she wasn't sure she knew exactly how to go about it. Returning home from the workshop Linda was delayed at the airport for several hours due to bad weather. Most people would say that this was bad luck, but Linda says it's one of the best things that happened to her.

While she was walking around the airport, Linda caught sight of Denny, a woman who had been a panelist at the workshop she had just attended. Although Linda hadn't met Denny at the workshop, she went up to her and said that she had enjoyed her comments and stories as a panelist. Linda asked Denny if she would like to sit down for a while to share more stories and perhaps give her some advice. “Sure!” Denny said. And, as they say, the rest is history.

As Denny and Linda got to know one another waiting for the weather to lift, Linda thought to herself that Denny would be a great addition to her personal board of directors.

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She told Denny about her action plan to develop new business for her firm, voiced some of her doubts about her ability to make it happen, and asked Denny if she had any guidance. Denny's response was to invite Linda to come to California and "shadow" her to see what she did to develop business.

A few weeks later, Linda cleared her calendar to travel to California to shadow Denny for a week. While Linda was there, Denny gave Linda a list of people who might be helpful to her in developing new business. Then Denny went even further. She made introductory calls to the people on the list asking them to spend time with Linda.

Being a conscientious and ambitious young woman, Linda followed up with each of the contacts. A couple, but not all, of them led to new business. They all led to new relationships, and Linda has done a good job keeping these new contacts in her ever-expanding professional network. And yes . . . Linda is on her firm's list to be promoted to partner this year, and Denny still plays a very active and helpful role on Linda's personal board of directors.

Open Doors

A board not only creates a whole new web of connections for you. Every person on your board holds the key to doors that otherwise may be closed to you; they can — and will — get you in to see key contacts, prospects, and others who can help you.

Lucy was one of our coaching clients who had a challenging and successful career as an executive in Chicago. She confided in her coach that, although she loved her work and her clients, she was wondering how she might move to Los Angeles to be closer to her mother and sister. Due to her parents divorce, Lucy had been separated from her mother and sister most of her life. In her early 30s she had been able to reconnect with them and now had a longing to be closer to them on a day-to-day basis. Lucy's coach asked her if she knew anyone in her firm's L.A. office. "Not a soul!" she answered. Then the coach suggested that Lucy talk to any of the executives in Chicago she felt close enough to ask for help.

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Lucy had close relationships with a couple of key Chicago executives on her board of directors; she decided to approach Sandy and confide her desire to move to L.A. As it turned out, Sandy knew Bill, the L.A. regional head in charge, very well and offered to call him to see if he could find any job opportunities for Lucy there.

Because of Sandy's close relationship with Bill, and because of her glowing comments about Lucy, Bill agreed to talk to Lucy and see whether he thought he could use her in L.A. When Lucy interviewed with Bill, he offered her a job on the spot — a job that not only was a great career move but allowed her to be involved in the lives of her mother, her sister, and her sister's children.

Advocate

Your board members can advocate for you — like Vicki's board members did when they lobbied the publisher for her promotion. They can talk to key people about your goals and your track record. They can sell your skills and experience to people on the lookout for new talent. They can work their magic to get you into key meetings, make sure you take the right training, go on the right sales calls, and make it onto the high-potential list.

Think of your board members as doing the things for you that Hollywood agents do for movie stars — they're out there scouting for great roles, stirring up good publicity, making sure their stars shine. Or, as one of our clients put it, "They're out there being opportunistic for me!"

Keep You on Track

To keep your career on an upward trajectory, you must have a guidance system. Your board is the GPS for your career. You tell them your goals, and they tell you whether they think you are a fit for the plan you have imagined. You check in to tell a board member about a challenge you are facing and he coaches you about how to work the situation to help get you to your next career stop — or not. Sometimes he'll step right in and pull you back onto the right course.

One of the lessons that Vicki learned from the almost-missed vice-presidency at her publishing company was she could have gained a lot more sooner if she'd had someone on her board from outside the company.

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If she had had a couple of outside advisors, she might have learned that the way the job heading the division was structured was not good for her career; she would have been advised not to accept the co-management arrangement in the first place.

Keep You Out of Trouble

If you're smart and serious about getting to the top, look to your board to keep you from making big career mistakes — like one of the times Mary Ann was offered a new job at the bank where she was working.

The executive in charge of the division where Mary Ann would be working was a kind and thoughtful person. The flip side was that he made constant unreasonable demands on everyone who worked for him. The problem wasn't the long nights and weekends when urgent projects had to get done; this guy thought everything was high priority and expected instant turnaround on routine stuff, week in, week out.

Mary Ann asked one of the members of her board — we'll call her Ruth — what she thought about Mary Ann's new opportunity. Ruth didn't hesitate to jerk Mary Ann back into reality. Ruth didn't ask for a single detail about the job Mary Ann was offered. She just raised her hands in mock horror and blurted out, "Are you nuts?!" Then she reminded Mary Ann what it would really be like to work for this person, day in, day out. Lovingly but very directly, Ruth said, "Remember how he drives you nuts? Where would you go after this? Working for this manager won't lead you anywhere that you want to go." Mary Ann realized she was running away from the unrewarding job she currently held and not toward something that would really make her career advance.

Challenge and Coach

A big advantage in having a group of people strategizing with you on how to get to the top is the broader perspective you'll get from them. No matter how good you think you are at seeing the big picture, it gets even bigger when you add six or seven sets of lenses to expand the frame. It's not just a matter of sharing their views; the best board members will challenge you — grilling you about those pesky everyday details that have a way of tripping us up, asking the hard questions about your grand strategy that can help you discover the potential flaws in your plan.

Look to your board to “tell it like it is” on everything from how to sharpen a crucial presentation to why you need to fire someone who's dragging your team down. Rely on them for advice on how to position yourself, and whom to talk to or what to aim for next. You'll gain confidence from tapping into their experience and you'll calm any fears you may have about making the next big step.

Develop You

We all need to grow new skills: “What got you here won't take you there.” Having a board will develop you. You will learn from just watching them. We all learn a huge amount from modeling, observing others model what we need to know and do. There is no teaching; we just learn how to do things from watching competent, smart, versatile people apply principles and exercise skills in real life. If you need to learn to delegate more, make it a point to see how one or more of your board members do it and you'll probably incorporate giving clear directions as part of your new delegation skill set. It's not osmosis, it's learning from observation.

Inside Secret

Things a board can do for you ...

- *Listen to you*
- *Ask hard questions, about the big stuff and small*
- *Challenge your assumptions and thinking*
- *Scout key opportunities for you*
- *Promote you, create buzz, spread the word about your “star power”*
- *Encourage you*
- *Make connections and open doors*
- *Help you see the big picture*

Support You

Recent research done at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Social Work showed that people with a support system were able to cope better with natural disasters (hurricanes, floods, etc) than those without. Your career is not a natural disaster, but you need a support system to help you cope and thrive through its ups and downs. Your support system is there not only to help you in hard times, but to celebrate the milestones of your career as well. You must have a support group to put their arms around you in good times and bad. Your personal board of directors is a vital subset of your larger support group.

PUTTING YOUR BOARD TOGETHER

Picking a personal board of directors can be a challenge. Since they don't really function together as a group, it's handy to remember that you can easily "retire" anyone who doesn't work out. For the good of your career, though, you need to be thoughtful about whom you pick at the outset. To get started, think about who has given you good advice before and who seems willing to help you be successful. Bottom line: you want your board to be made up of individuals whom you trust and respect and who are willing to help you develop your career.

Aim for a Rich Mix

An ideal board will have a mix of people on it. For example, you could have two or three people from the organization you work in. You also need to have at least one woman on your board who is ahead of you on the career ladder. Her perspective on issues that she and other women have faced will be indispensable. You also need at least one person who is external to your organization. It can be someone who has known you a long time. Ideally, you would include a couple of people who specialize in your industry, know trends, and understand the future because career planning requires people who are future oriented also. You need to go for high ranking people. Don't be hesitant about going for the top people to be on your board.

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Joyce was the director of product development and marketing at a large financial services institution. The president of the company was a dynamic, fast-paced, action-oriented, make-it-happen leader who had grown the company quickly.

The president believed in managing by walking around and regularly visited all the divisions and departments in the company. His style was to quickly walk through saying hello to everyone and buzzing on to the next place. It was more of a run-through than a walk-through.

Joyce realized that this was her opportunity to talk to the president when he came flying through, but if she didn't have a way to catch his attention, he would just keep going. She was nervous about just walking up and saying, "Let me tell you what I have done"—and she also knew she needed to get to know him and to get him to get to know her. She wanted him to be thinking about her as a talented leader in the company. She started working on a plan for how she would get his attention.

A week later, as he did one of his regular managing by walking around tours, Joyce jumped up, walked over, and said, "I know how to cut expenses by 30% in this area." The president put on the brakes, turned to her, and said, "Well ... tell me about it!" He stood and talked with her for 20 minutes about her idea and then invited her to meet with him in his office to follow up. At their second meeting, she also talked to him about her career and she asked if she could come see him in the future for career advice. She had a new board member!

Another way to think about picking people for your board is to consider the role each person can best play in guiding your career. For example, one idea is to choose a clarifier who asks clear questions, a connector who leads you to other people, a challenger who helps you act boldly, and a wise elder or sage (Leider, 2000). Add to that list a woman or two, an organizational insider, and a couple of people from outside your company — and presto! You'll have a good assortment of board members available to you.

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Sometimes you can get a good assortment by choosing people who are able to mix different roles. One person might be part therapist, part coach, part strategist, part friend; they may emphasize one aspect or another in advising you on a particular situation. Your needs are going to change over time, and the roles and outlooks you need are going to change. This way, if you have people who perform more than one role as you change, they can stay on your board.

It's important to continually take stock of who is on your board and who else might need to be there. Just as you look in your closet to figure out what new clothes you need for the upcoming season, you need to evaluate the composition of your board often to figure out what type of people you need to help you be successful at the next stage of your career.

Betty took a new job in a different city as the head of a region for a large financial services provider. She took stock of her board and realized that she needed to add a "good ol' boy" — someone who liked her and would tell others she was "OK!" She also needed to add a woman sales mentor who could teach her the ins and outs of business development. She knew that women use a different sales approach from men, and to succeed in her new role she would now need specific ideas from another female on developing new business.

Betty brought two very different people onto her board, and she attributes much of her success to the guidance these two new people gave her.

Recruit Truth-Tellers

You need to spread your board "demographics" around on the one hand, but your board also needs to have some characteristics in common. First and foremost, they need to be truth-tellers. What do we mean by that? Truth-telling is very different from the subtle steering many advisors and coaches are comfortable with — those who take an "on-the-one-hand... but on-the-other-hand" approach. Not that's there's anything wrong with that — it's just that you need more than an exercise in reasoning or diplomacy to "get it" sometimes.

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Truth-tellers are direct; they are willing to risk ticking you off. From the mouth of a master, truth-telling can hit like a bomb. Take the healthcare manager who went to one of her board members and said, "I want to get promoted to divisional vice president. Any ideas?" Bam, like a shot, her board member fired right back: "You need to change your team, and you need to delegate more — or else you're going to get stuck where you are!" Or the reaction one of our clients got when she told a board member that she was flirting with the idea of running for local office. "What?! Are you out of your mind?!" Or a truth-telling advisor's response to a young high-potential who wanted to put in for a resume-building project: "If you're serious, you need to upgrade your wardrobe. You won't be taken seriously as a candidate for this job as long as you look like you just got out of college."

Truth-telling is always an act of courage — there is nothing cautious or diplomatic about it, even when your board members don't use the drop-the-neutron-bomb technique. One of the best truth-tellers we know makes his point by simply saying, "Tell me why you would want to do that." The point is, you need truth-teller board members, people who will tell you the hard facts and make things crystal clear about where you are and where you're headed. Truth-tellers help you to see reality for what it is; the more of them you have on your board, the clearer the view.

What Else to Look For

Your board members need to be successful people who have achieved status and eminence in their careers. People who haven't been successful haven't figured out the game or the system — and there's no point in wasting their time or yours in asking for their advice.

Look also for people who have vision and a compelling image of the possibilities the future holds — for themselves and for you.

Inside Secret

When putting your board together, don't overlook ...

- *Past bosses*
- *Current or former clients*
- *Former co-workers you admire*
- *Leaders in your industry*
- *Former professors*
- *At least one woman*
- *Retired executives*

Hire a Personal Board of Directors (Because You're the CEO of your Career)

You want advisors who know the external marketplace, as well as the internal one your organization operates in. You want people who are skilled at looking at an organization or industry and sizing up what's happening now and where the trends are likely to lead. You want people who know people, who know who's who — their network will become your network. You want board members who are political — they know business is a game, and they know how to play it well. You want people who are passionate about their work and their own careers — from them you will learn how passion keeps you in the game over the long haul.

HOW TO ASK: ONE MEETING AT A TIME

How do you ask someone to be on your board? Most of the time, to ask someone outright to “be on my board” wouldn't give them a clue to what you're really asking them for. The key is that you don't ask them to be on your board; what you do is build a relationship with them. Women are good at relationships; it is something that we do well. With each of your board members, you want to form a relationship that has reciprocity. This is a relationship that is built on mutual respect, truth telling, and authenticity. The board member will get a lot out of it by seeing you be successful. From their standpoint, it is very rewarding to counsel, and coach, and develop someone and see them grow. It's also really cool that someone values your advice and takes it. So advising you on your career is something that board members will enjoy doing.

Although you don't just ask them to meet for coffee and say, “Be on my Board,” you do invite them for coffee or lunch or out to dinner and discuss the goals that you have and how you envision having them involved — and take it one meeting at a time. Think about how you'd approach an old boss — former bosses make really good board members — or clients that you've worked with who have deep respect for you. Over lunch, dinner, or coffee, you might say, “You've been really helpful to me and I would like to come back to you sometimes when I need help with things. I'd like to get your good advice on my work and career.” Ninety-nine percent of the time, that person will say yes to you. Picture yourself across the table from a potential board member; then picture yourself asking if you can come to them for advice, and of course they say, “Yes!”

Inside Secret

If you're having trouble asking . . .

It's hard to ask for help. But, to be successful, it's something you have to learn to do. Sometimes when we talk with the women we coach about hiring their own board of directors, we find there is a resistance at first to showing vulnerability or letting others know that they don't know it all. What does that voice of resistance inside say to you?

- *"I don't want to look dumb"?*
- *"Be strong; don't be needy."?*
- *"I'm smart; I can figure this out."?*
- *"Don't be dependent."?*
- *"I'm not important . . . so don't bother those people."?*

There are countless variations. Our resistance to asking for help is rooted in our hope that we can do whatever-it-is alone. It often springs from a deep-seated belief that somehow we are not worthy to receive another's attention or guidance, or that to be successful we need to be independent, self-reliant, and strong.

Get over it. Get over the fear of showing that you don't know everything. Running your career without asking for help from other people — wiser, more experienced, even smarter people than you — is like playing solitaire with half a deck. You may go through the motions, but you'll ultimately lose out. If you interview anyone who has had a successful career in any kind of organization, they'll tell you that they were helped by several major guides along the way. Putting your personal board of directors together is nothing more than being deliberate about getting those guides and letting them help you. All you have to do is ask. We promise: No one will see that as being weak or insecure; they'll see it as a smart career move.

Remember this too: The people you want on your board are people who want to feel needed. Believe us, they want to be asked for advice, to share their experience, to pass their legacy to a rising star. They want to feel like they have something to offer. And the biggest payoff for them is to see you succeed. They love to be able to say things like we heard from one of our client's board members: "You know, when Pat was named chief of manufacturing, I felt like I got a promotion!"

YOU HAVE A BOARD, NOW WHAT?

You ask them to coffee or lunch to discuss your goals. You talk to them about opportunities you may have. You ask them for feedback. You compare notes on issues in your profession. You update them by e-mail or voice mail on what is going on with your job and what you think your next step might be. You ask them how they made tough choices at different stages of their careers.

Suppose you've been presented with your choice of two different plum assignments that appear to be great opportunities for your career, and you're being recruited hard by two different people you admire. What to do? Call up a couple of your board members and ask them for their perspectives on the advantages and disadvantages of each assignment.

Or, imagine that you're managing a project that's not going well, and you don't want to talk to your boss about it because some of the problem might actually be your boss. Call up one of your board members and say, "Can I buy you a cup of coffee tomorrow? I'd like to talk to you about" Go in prepared to share the details they need to know about the situation, then come right out and ask for their advice.

Or, say you're thinking about putting your name in the hat for a special assignment at your company. Ask a couple of your board members, "What have you been hearing?" "How do you think this might help me?" "Where do you think I could apply this later?"

Ask for your board's advice on thorny day to day issues — like not getting paid what you know you're worth or how to work the system for a more flexible work schedule. And always touch base with board members when you're dealing with the huge changes in your life — a new boss, a merger, a divorce, a new baby, thoughts of leaving your job or company. You have chosen your board to help you through good times and bad; if they don't have a deep personal interest in your continuing success, then it's probably time to "retire" them gracefully.

Inside Secret

What to talk to your board about ...

- *Career goals*
- *Choices on assignments*
- *Sticky situations*
- *Pay issues*
- *Training and continuing education*
- *Internal positions*

Care and Feeding of Your Board

From interviewing clients, conducting workshops, and coaching hundreds of women headed to the top, we've gleaned a book-length list of do's and don'ts for working with a board of directors. Here are some of the most memorable, in our clients' own words.

Some Do's

- Do reach out continually
- Do reach out to other offices and geographies when putting your board together
- Do share good news with your board members (this is a safe way to practice self-promotion)
- Do individualize your communications with them — no “form” notes or letters, no “canned” voice mails
- Do figure out the best way to communicate with each board member (email, voice mail, etc.)
- Do have clear objectives, spoken or unspoken, for what you want from each meeting with your board members
- Do get involved in their projects
- Do appreciate their help — say thanks often, and publicly acknowledge their assistance, when appropriate
- Do draw on their unique expertise
- Do be respectful of their time
- Do be specific in framing your requests — “Will you help me with X?” “May I come see you next Tuesday to hear your thoughts on Y?”
- Do make things easy for them — for example, provide a draft letter of a recommendation for them to use, or not
- Do make friends with their executive assistants
- Do learn about their interests and accomplishments

Some Don'ts

- Never underestimate what people are willing to do for you
- Don't be hesitant to reach out
- Don't go to anyone – ever – and ask, “Will you be my mentor?”
- Don't go into a meeting or conversation without an agenda
- Don't give up
- Don't call only when you need help
- Don't say no (or think very carefully if you do) to things they ask you to do for them
- Don't be high maintenance
- Don't ever whine!

The Most Important “Do”

The most important thing to do is to keep the people on your board enrolled and motivated. And how do you do that? You communicate with them. You let them know the good news, the bad news, and what's in between. You engage them in a meaningful way — no perfunctory questions, no rote answers. You ask their advice about real-world issues, not just your hopes and dreams. You don't waste their time. You take their advice, and let them know you did; you don't take their advice, and let them know why. You include them in things that are happening in your life — and, most especially, you celebrate with them.

Inside Secret

A short list of do's and don'ts

- *Do update your board members regularly about what you have been up to*
Do help your board members with things they need
- *Don't ask someone “Will you be on my board?” or “Will you be my mentor?”*
Instead ask them to give you occasional advice about your career.
- *Don't have a meeting of all your board members*
- *Don't feel obligated to talk about your “board” or to tell others who are the members of your board*

Hire a Personal Board of Directors (Because You're the CEO of your Career)

Anytime you leave a job and you get to give that little speech to thank people for what they've done so that you could move on, that's an opportunity to celebrate and publicly thank these special people by name.

The Most Important Don't

Don't ever forget reciprocity. You can't have a one-way relationship with your board members. In addition to thanking them for their help, publicly and privately, you also need to be ready and willing to help them with projects, problems, and opportunities that they may have. People like to mentor and develop other people; there is a certain joy in seeing people being successful, but that's not enough. Always remember that you need to give something else back to your board members — make your relationships a two-way deal.

Megan was a woman that Kathryn coached a few years ago who forgot this rule and got in trouble with one of her board members. Kathryn was conducting a 360 on Megan and called on one of the executives Megan had worked for in the past and had been on Megan's board. When Kathryn called, this man was abrupt and said, "Why does Megan want my input?" After a long conversation, Kathryn figured out that he was mad at Megan. He had invited her into his home for Thanksgiving with his family, he had gone out of his way to help her get key assignments, and he had helped her get on an important client pitch team. And Megan had not been in touch with him for over a year. She had been working on a difficult assignment and had not sought him out, called him, or even e-mailed him.

She had hurt his feelings by not keeping up with him. He cared about Megan and had invested a great deal of time and energy in helping her — and he felt that she had dropped him.

The lesson learned here is that working with board members is a two-way relationship. They invest in you and you must invest in them.

YOUR NEXT ASSIGNMENT

Draw a conference table, with six to eight chairs around it. (See Figure on next page for an example.) Now, fill in the names of the people you would most want to sit at those "seats." Think about people inside your organization, outside the organization, former bosses, current or former clients, professors you've had, people who may have retired but had great careers, successful people who have been your colleagues in the past.

Write in the names to make a first- draft picture of the board of directors you want to guide you to the top. Jot down the reasons you think each of them would be a useful member of your board.

THE LAST WORD: GETTING THE MOST FROM YOUR BOARD

The keys to getting the most from your board are simple:

- Focus on career strategy — recruit people who can help you build an ambitious and realistic plan for getting where you want to go
- Use your board as advisors, as guides, as advocates
- Diversity on your board is essential — the more perspectives, the richer the picture
- Pay attention to the care and feeding of your board — keep them enrolled and motivated

We all need people to help us. Recall the African proverb: *"It takes a community to raise a child."* You are a grown up, and it still takes a community to guide you. Your board is your community. If you will let these people help you, your career will soar.

