

People on projects

VOLUME 2 | ISSUE 7 | JULY 2004

The Project Management Best Practices Report

Guest Columnist

Taking Charge of Your Career

Suggestions for reaching your full potential

by John L. Bennett | Many of us watched as our parents and grandparents worked for one or two employers throughout all their years of employment. But today, estimates tell us that the average American will have seven or more jobs in their lifetime. As the Gen X'ers mature in the workforce, we can expect to see more mobility than was prevalent 20 or even 10 years ago. In 2003, Herman, Gioia and Olivet wrote *Impending Crisis: Too Many Jobs, Too Few People*, in which they forecasted the impacts of the U.S. Department of Labor's projected shortage of workers by the end of this decade.

Today career paths take many directions and forms. In her 1997 book on workforce development, Beverly Kaye reminded us that *Up Is Not the Only Way*. In fact, careers may take a trajectory that appears to be more like a misguided or unguided rocket; a kite blowing in the wind. With rapid changes in skills required to perform successfully, mergers and acquisitions, financial successes and failures, companies no longer imply lifetime employment or clear paths for career mobility. The paths that once laid the course of a career no longer exist. And the paths that might be designed today are likely to become obsolete.

Another reality is that just as the work environments in all sectors have changed, so have employees. Gone are the days of believing that every employee had complete and absolute loyalty to the organization. Today managers (and therefore organizations) recognize that employee interests are as diverse as the workforce. Some still seek to "climb the corporate

The paths that once laid the course for a career no longer exist. But you can still take charge of your career direction with these tips.

ladder"; some seek to build a résumé in preparation for the next job; others work to acquire the means for other interests, such as family and retirement.

Due to the instability of the career paths and reporting relationships, the days of mentors being able to guide and shepherd the careers of protégés is gone. Today, the path that a person who might mentor you has taken probably no longer exists (even if the organization does), and the knowledge, skills and abilities to achieve that same position have changed

or are likely to change dramatically by the time you are prepared to make a career move.

So, what can you do to prepare yourself and manage your career? Here are 15 suggestions:

Set goals. Establish goals for your career. What do you want to be doing in two, five, 10 and 20 years? Where do you want to be doing it? What knowledge, skills and abilities will be required? What actions can you take to prepare yourself? What relationships can you establish and foster that will support you in achieving these goals? What can you do to maintain your focus on these goals? How will you reward yourself for accomplishing goals?

Maintain an "open eye." Continually look for changes in your profession, your organization, the marketplace and yourself. How are these changes likely to affect you and your career? What action can you take to prepare yourself for what you are observing and experiencing?

Be flexible. Just as your interests and abilities are likely to change, so are the opportunities. Remain flexible. What alternatives can you develop? How can



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you keep yourself flexible and adaptable to face external changes that are beyond your control?

Build on strengths. In their book, *Now, Discover Your Strengths*, Buckingham and Clifton report that many organizations and managers (and employees) assume that our greatest areas for growth and development are in our areas of greatest weakness. In fact, only 20 percent of the employees in their survey reported having the opportunity to use their strengths on a regular basis, and when they were used, customer satisfaction, employee retention and financial returns were higher. What are you doing to identify your strengths? What are you doing to build your strengths? What are you doing to use your strengths? What are you doing to find alternative solutions to your weaknesses?

Learn new skills. The skills we used yesterday may not be relevant tomorrow. We do not have to look far to see how rapidly skills and knowledge become obsolete in this information-based economy. What are you doing to identify your skill and information needs for the future? What will you do to acquire the skills and knowledge necessary to maintain? What will it take to advance—reach your goals?

Get to know people—network. It is estimated that 60–80 percent of jobs are located through personal connections. In my book, *The Essential Network*, I outline 75 suggestions for building, maintaining and using personal connections. Who do you know? Who would you like to get to know? What can you do to support the goals of others? Yes, give it away! What are your strengths as a networker? What will you do to continuously develop your network of personal relationships?

Use a “board of advisors.” Form a group of two to four advisors to guide you and support you with your career-related questions. This will provide you with a diverse set of perspectives and help build your network. And two (or more) heads are usually better than one. Establish a relationship with people who can provide you with the perspectives and contacts you will need to support your goals. Ask them to serve on your

“board,” and tell them how you believe they can help you. Keep them informed about your interests, experiences, questions, etc. Access them on an as-needed basis. Honor their time and demonstrate your appreciation for the gift they are providing you. Who do you know that can provide a value perspective? What do you need to tell them about yourself? What questions do you have of them? How would you like to interact with them? How can you keep them informed about yourself?

Walk carefully; run cautiously. With the rapid and dramatic change occurring in organizations your peers today may be your boss in the morning; the subordinate you had yesterday may be your boss next week. Be careful about the politics of the office place. As you climb, move or remain relatively stable in your career, remember to treat others with respect—as you would like them to treat you. What can you do to build and maintain relationships as you move through your career? How can you model professional behavior?

Seek professional assistance. While using the assistance of your “board of advisors” can be helpful, it may be appropriate to seek the assistance of a professional coach. Many coaches work with clients seeking to address career planning and transition issues. Coaches can be particularly helpful in helping clients discover possibilities, explore options, reflect, develop and implement action plans, and be accountable. Coaches are often qualified to administer and interpret various personality and interest assessments. Be sure to evaluate the training and experience of coaches.

Package yourself. Maintain an up-to-date résumé and portfolio. Don’t wait until a job opportunity arises to update your résumé. You may find it helpful to maintain a file of key accomplishments, training, professional and community activities, and awards. Maintain a file of supporting documents that include examples of your work, reports, awards, certificates, etc. Your résumé and work abilities are two important aspects of packaging yourself; another is you—how you look and act. This includes what you wear, your physical condition and how

you behave at work (as well as in social settings with colleagues and customers). What impression do you want others to have of you? What are you doing to maintain an up-to-date résumé? What can you do to maintain the image of yourself that you want others to see?

Be successful. One of the best indicators of future success is past success. Be successful in all you do. When objectives or tasks are not accomplished, take appropriate responsibility. What are you doing to demonstrate success? Without boasting, what are you doing to make others aware of your success? What can you do to make others aware of the successes of your teammates? How do you take failures and setbacks and learn from them?

Obtain training and certification. Maintaining up-to-date knowledge and skills requires a commitment on your part as well as your employer’s. If your profession has a credentialing program, complete it. Maintain it. What professional training and credentialing is recognized in your profession? What will serve you best as you reach your goals? What action will you take to acquire and maintain an up-to-date knowledge and skill base related to your current job and career goals?

Be active. An effective way for you to establish yourself as a leader in the profession is to become actively involved in related professional associations locally and nationally. Through associations you can learn about current trends, meet and get to know (and be known by) leaders in the field, demonstrate your commitment to the profession and learn of job opportunities. What professional associations pertain to your work? Which are (or will you become) actively involved in? How well are you taking advantage of this involvement? What more will you do?

Take responsibility. This is your career. You own it. You are responsible. What commitments will you make to establish/re-establish your goals? What actions will you take to demonstrate your ongoing commitment for your career?

Help others. Give away what you have. Help others in your field (and those with whom you work) to reach

their goals. Helping them be successful will strengthen your support network, improve the success of the organization, demonstrate your commitment to developing human capital, allow you to learn more about the work of others, enhance your managerial skills, etc. Besides, it will feel good! What will you do to help and support others?

THIS LAST TIP may be the most important of all. Again and again, research shows that people who help others not only achieve greater productivity at work, but are more satisfied in their personal lives as well. ■

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cializes in helping individuals and organizations prepare for and improve from change. He is author of *Leading the Edge of Change* (2000) and *The Essential Network* (2001). John has earned the Certified Management Consultant and Professional Certified Coach credentials. Contact John at www.lawton-assoc.com.