

Success in Your Career Rests On a Three-Legged Stool; COMMENTARY

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Body

I tell young people that their career represents a three-legged stool. You need all three to have a strong foundation that allows you to succeed in your career as well as manage the setbacks that will inevitably come:

First leg is your credentials. That's generally your degree. For many, where you go to college or grad school often drives the kind of opportunities that you will have post-graduation. Many of the great opportunities that were afforded to me, particularly early in my career, are a result of being a graduate of Stanford Law School.

Second leg is your experience. This is the expertise or the skill you bring to your work. Whatever your field, you generally know more and become more skilled the longer you do it and the more experience you have. The law for one has always been somewhat of an apprenticeship and it is understood that junior lawyers must seek out and partner with more experienced lawyers to get the training that you need to be able to practice on your own.

Third leg is your network. This is the piece they don't teach you but it is a critical part of your career. When you are just starting out, it is easy to fall into the trap of just putting in hours and following the path those more senior at your firm or organization have laid out before you. That path will generally ensure you learn the skills you need (e.g. the second leg) but are skills enough?

That path is generally linear and only leads you to one place. What happens if you need to make a transition? Or when you are promoted and need to leverage your relationships to develop business? Below, I lay out some of the more salient reasons, that building and nurturing your network merits as much attention as the first two legs:

Transitions

Very few people actually stay at their first job. You will need your network if you make a transition. I've had a lot of jobs - I've worked in politics, government, philanthropy, and the law, and all of those transitions were a result or guided by my network.

Yes, that includes mentors, but also includes, law school classmates, friends and former colleagues, and current or former bosses. Just like it's your job to keep up on the latest developments in your field of expertise, it's your job to keep up with your network. Not because you need or will need anything from them, but because it is the strength of your network that will sustain you over time.

This proposition is supported by the research. A 2018 study was done by the Harvard Business Review of 2300 Black women alumni of the Harvard Business School, focusing in on 67 that attained the position of chair, CEO or other C-level executives in a corporation or senior managing director or partner in a professional services firm.

With all of the women who were profiled, their careers were characterized by twists and turns, with lateral moves and promotion. These women pursued opportunities to learn, and if a role at a company didn't allow them to grow, they activated their networks and identified new opportunities.

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The study showed that the success of those Black women depended on "having developed relationships with people who recognized their talent, gave them a safe space in which to make and learn from mistakes, provided candid and actionable feedback about their performance, and generally made it their business to support them and create opportunities for them to succeed."

Business Development

If you make your career at a law firm, at some point you will be asked to generate business. Some will be fortunate to be folded into existing client relationships, but most will have to generate business on their own.

How do you do that? One important source is your relationships. Which ones? College and graduate school classmates, former colleagues, people you know from professional or alumni associations, fellow board members, and friends.

Many of these people will have need for the services you or your organization provide. You'll want to reach out to them and let them know what you can offer, all of which is much easier if you've been in touch and it hasn't been 10 years since you've spoken.

Service to the Community

Service to the community and community engagement more broadly is also important (and pro bono work if you a lawyer). There are many ways to engage in your community. I currently serve on the boards of the Roosevelt Institute and the Stone Barns Center for Food and Agriculture, important organizations that make significant contributions on a local and national level. Both opportunities that came to me via my network.

Professionally, I am fortunate to work at a firm that has a robust pro bono program and recently made a \$250 million commitment over the next five years to providing pro bono legal services. I have worked on a few pro bono matters at the firm, but the one which I have spent the most time, and recently won an award from the Legal Aid Society for, was a case on behalf of single homeless New Yorkers against the City of New York to ensure that they were provided safe accommodations during the course of the pandemic that took into account their risk factors and accommodated their disabilities.

It was a case that was brought to me by a neighbor who was seeking representation on behalf of the homeless, who knew that I had previously advocated on their behalf. Through a great team effort with my colleagues at Jenner & Block LLP, we were successful in obtaining reforms, and that had allowed the homeless to stay in hotel rooms that would have otherwise remained empty in order to safely socially distance. It was an important opportunity to be of service and came to me through my network.

Resiliency

Your network will also provide critical support for you personally. You cannot excel and do your best work if you do not feel supported. Sometimes this is someone acting as your cheerleader or someone that helps promote you to others.

As one example, a good friend had recently been profiled in a magazine and was asked for names of other professional women that they could profile. She gave them my name. I ended up doing it and it was a great piece that increased my profile. Years later, I was approached about an important board seat that I couldn't undertake given my commitments at the time, and I was able to put her name forward. She was excited about the opportunity and gratified to take on the role. Win-win for everybody and an example of the power of your networks.

Your network is also there to sustain you if you fall. That may be in the form of providing informal counsel on challenges you are having at work with a boss or a colleague or helping you land at your next amazing role if you have to transition.

So hopefully I have effectively laid out why you need your network and why it is the critical third leg of the stool. But how do you get one?

You already have the building blocks. Start with your professors, mentors and colleagues. Keep in touch with them even if it's just an email update on how you're doing or a coffee as a means of keeping in touch.

You never know where people are going to end up and who will be in a position to support and elevate you later in your career. These people invested in you at some point and presumably continue to be invested in your development and success. Professional associations provide additional opportunities for fellowship, and possible career support later in your career. You do this without any sense that you will ever call on or need anything from them, even though you may.

So what's the moral of this story? Open your contacts. Reconnect with friends and former colleagues and put reconnecting with folks on your to do list for 2022.

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