

EMBRACING EFFICACY TO DRIVE YOUR CAREER



THE **POWER**
OF **CHOICE**

MICHAEL C.
HYTER

WILEY

Praise for *The Power of Choice*

“Efficacy is game changing. Too often in our careers and in our lives, we become thwarted by limitations set by others or even ourselves. *The Power of Choice* shows you how to take control of your professional destiny and move forward with the confidence and competence required to be effective and successful. I’m thrilled Mike Hyter is sharing these life-changing principles.”

—**Donna James**, Managing Director, Lardon & Associates;
Former President, Nationwide Strategies Investments

“I participated in an Efficacy seminar as a freshman at Harvard. In the forty years since, it has helped me navigate tough career decisions and manage complex layers of interactions I’ve experienced as a professional man of color in academic and corporate environments.”

—**William H. Carson, M.D.**, President and CEO, (Retired)
Otsuka Pharmaceutical Development & Commercialization

“Every year I share this book with our young, talented administrative fellows. The book lays out a strategy to use the “power of choice” to pursue their personal and career fulfillment. The conversations sparked by the book inevitably lead to a better understanding of their life purpose and what it means to ‘live life by design, rather than default.’”

—**Gerry Lupacchino**, SVP Experience,
Engagement and Organization Development, Hartford HealthCare

“I was fortunate to have exposure to the *Power of Choice* early in my career. It has served as a critical enabler to my advancement and success—a compass to navigate opportunities and challenges, to take individual responsibility for my career, and to shape my career journey by ‘design, not by default.’ Now, I’m committed to pay it forward by exposing future leaders and executives to the practical advice and proven career strategies outlined in this book.”

—**Shanda Hinton**, Talent Management Executive,
Fortune 100 Company

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*I dedicate this book to my children, Ashlei, Mike Jr., Donovan,
Ten, and Ace, and to my granddaughters, Donatella and Isabella.*

Your future is the inspiration for this book.

I love you all.

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Foreword

I FIRST ENCOUNTERED the principles that are the core of this book as a student at Harvard University, and they immediately resonated with me. My parents had always encouraged me to believe in myself and to have the confidence to shape my own path, despite the obstacles presented by the segregated society into which I was born. I was determined to succeed, and to do it in a way that was true to myself. That mindset has had a powerful impact on my career path, my approach to leadership, and the success I've achieved along the way.

A pivotal example came in my senior year of college. As my peers busily applied for jobs, I was unsure what direction to take. My undergraduate major—and passion—was economics, but I was also drawn to the law. My gut was telling me to follow a path that combined the two. However, I didn't know anyone who had done that, so it seemed like a “crazy idea” to my 21-year-old brain (an assessment readily shared by the friends who thought I would be a “natural” lawyer).

It took a great deal of self-confidence, and the encouragement of one of my favorite professors, to follow the path that felt right to me—but that's what I did, earning both a JD and a PhD in economics. I consider it one of the best decisions I've ever made, because it laid the foundation for what has been a wholly fulfilling

and meaningful career grounded in my deepest passions and interests.

In charting my career path after graduation, I didn't have the benefit of Mike Hyter's *The Power of Choice*. But so much of the advice he delivers in this engaging and insightful book rings true to the experiences I've had. For example, Mike explains that although technical proficiency is foundational to career success, it's not enough. When I entered the workforce, I had solid credentials and competence in two fields, thanks to the educational path I chose. But I quickly recognized that to have the kind of impact I wanted to have, I'd need to deliberately hone the skills that Mike identifies as equally essential to technical proficiency: building relationships and influencing others.

The value of relational proficiency was never more apparent to me than in my days at the U.S. Federal Reserve. When President Clinton appointed me to the Fed's Board of Governors, I was not well known by many in the Fed system, having spent more than a decade in the consulting world. While I never doubted that I had the capabilities and the skills to succeed, I also knew that if I wanted to make a truly meaningful contribution, I would need to develop strong relationships at all levels of the organization. I was proactive in investing the time to get to know my colleagues, and in the process, I gained a much broader and deeper understanding of the Fed—its operations, history, and culture. This in turn enabled me to be more effective in my own role and to add value to the work of my colleagues, and I believe it's an important reason I had the honor of being appointed vice chairman in 1999.

My strong network of Fed relationships was also invaluable in helping me navigate what would be one of the greatest leadership challenges I have ever faced. When terrorists struck the U.S. on 9/11, I was the only Fed governor in Washington, D.C., so it became my responsibility to lead the Fed's initial response to the attacks. Our job was to safeguard the stability of the U.S. financial system, a task that required herculean efforts by the Fed team. I believe my colleagues were comfortable having me lead them in this vital effort because of the relationships we had established long before that day.

It's in my current role as CEO of TIAA that I've most strongly relied on the influential proficiency that I've worked to build throughout my career. A key part of my role is setting the strategic direction for our 101-year-old company, to ensure our continued success in helping our clients achieve lifelong financial well-being. But CEOs don't have the luxury of devising and announcing a new plan and having everyone automatically jump on board. Getting buy-in is a process that begins with listening to others, to gather their ideas and input. Then, once a strategic direction is set, it requires relentless communication across the organization, delivered in a way that both informs and inspires. As I have come to learn over the course of my career, leadership is very much about followership. To put it another way, you can't be out in front of the parade unless there are people willing to line up and march behind you. Successful CEOs—like professionals at all levels who want to shape their organizations—must be able to influence others, shaping opinions and inspiring action that advances the organization's objectives.

With *The Power of Choice*, Mike has done a fantastic job in offering a plethora of career-building strategies, grounded in the principles of Efficacy, that are highly relevant and extremely valuable for today's workers. It's especially meaningful that the book addresses the often unspoken obstacles that individuals from traditionally underrepresented groups face in their career journeys. As an African American whose career has spanned the private and public sectors, I am well aware that those obstacles are real. However, they should never be the final word on success. In my own life, I've endeavored to keep my focus where I believe it is most effective: on what I can control as an individual, on the mindset I bring to challenges, and on continually learning and growing. If that approach resonates with you, then you'll deeply value the advice and perspective that Mike offers in this excellent book.

Roger W. Ferguson, Jr.
President and CEO, TIAA

Acknowledgments

WHO COULD HAVE known that an idea for improving academic achievement and a commitment to making a difference would turn into a practice that has positively impacted thousands of professionals and students for more than a generation? In the early 1970s, Dr. Jeff Howard had the insight and courage to create a development experience for Black students at Harvard University to address the educational disparities between Black students and white students. Dr. Howard called his approach “Efficacy.” Dr. Howard’s success at Harvard ultimately led to the founding of J. Howard and Associates, which enabled professionals in hundreds of companies to experience those same ideas and approaches that had significantly improved the performance of students at Harvard. I have Dr. Howard to thank for birthing the movement, laying the foundation, and bringing together talented professionals to make this powerful approach to driving development a reality. If it weren’t for his leadership, many of the key ideas in this book would not exist.

I also want to express my appreciation to Marc Wallace, Audra Bohannon, and Verna Ford for making these important principles come to life for so many companies and individuals. Marc, Audra, and Verna were among the first thought-leaders at J. Howard and Associates, and we still hear from past participants about how

significant and beneficial the experience was for their careers. Over the years, Marc, Audra, and Verna, along with all our facilitators, have continued to expand the ideas of Efficacy and their application. For instance, Verna added the concept of the three types of confidence—technical, influential, and relational—that has profoundly shaped how we talk about the skills that are important to navigating a career. Audra has helped evolve our understanding of the power of making conscious choices.

Writing a book that captures the strategies and impact of this powerful approach to development isn't an easy task. I could not have done this alone. Many of my colleagues—Kameelah Benjamin-Fuller, Jan Clarkson, Jorge Farias, Diane Johnson, Luisa Kurtz, Kristine Perez-Foley, and Barbara Smith—gave their support by reading the first version of this manuscript and providing feedback along the way. Kameelah also conducted some of the interviews, and Jan did an outstanding job of pulling that information into the real-world examples in the final section of the book. Barbara helped me craft the guidelines for putting Efficacy principles into action that appear at the end of each chapter. When it was time to update the book, JT Saunders and Anna Isabelle Vivas navigated us through the twists and turns of making revisions—no easy task in the midst of our busy and rewarding client service activities.

I also had the support of many folks outside Korn Ferry. They contributed by recounting their stories—both their successes and tough lessons. They reviewed manuscript drafts and helped me bring the Power of Choice alive. To protect their confidentiality, I'm not going to list their names here, but I hope you know who you are and what a difference you made.

Of course, I thank my wife, Tisha, for all of her patience and support during this project (and the three years of planning). I will be forever grateful.

Finally, every project like this one requires an anchor who brings it all together. Kathy Lenox was my right hand throughout this process. Kathy has been a longtime contributor to our company and a strong partner of mine on many projects over the years. Our mutual passion and commitment to this body of work is strong and very

much aligned. Her support in helping me with the writing and editing, managing the process with all of its moving parts, and keeping me on schedule has made all the difference. I can't really express in words how much her partnership has meant to me, but I'm happy to say that we got this done and it's all good! Thank you, Kathy.

Introduction

I HAVE FOCUSED MY CAREER on supporting the talent development of a vibrant and diverse workforce. This work means that I have the opportunity to speak to large numbers of up-and-coming professionals who are eager to make their mark and navigate through a successful career. These individuals are hungry for practical advice about how to accomplish the goals that are important to them. Many think of themselves as—or are considered by others to be—“different” from the majority of employees in their organizations.

In talking with these rising professionals, who come from a wide variety of backgrounds and an array of industries, I encounter an interesting ambivalence about the relevance of differences in today’s multicultural workforce. On one hand, there are countless people from different ethnic backgrounds, races, gender, cultures, sexual orientations, and religions, all of whom are living their dreams that they achieved through their own hard work, intentionality, and support from others. This is a true sign of progress.

On the other hand, these same differences are still causing debate and division. In spite of a changing population and expanding opportunities, I still hear concerns about the impact of being different when it comes to being recognized and rewarded in the workplace. Many professionals look around and don’t see many individuals like themselves in senior management. They notice

that their careers aren't progressing as they expected or as quickly as their colleagues'. They see others like themselves leaving the company for unclear reasons or "better" opportunities.

As these hard-working professionals make these observations—and when they encounter the inevitable challenges or setbacks of a demanding career—questions begin to emerge: Do I have to work twice as hard as my counterparts to receive the same recognition and opportunities? Do I have to sacrifice who I am in order to fit in? These kinds of questions, sometimes raised overtly but more often unspoken, add another level of complexity—and distraction—to the challenge of managing a rewarding and satisfying career.

I've wrestled with these and other questions throughout my own career. I grew up in Detroit, Michigan, during the 1960s. When I graduated from Michigan State University in the late 1970s, I began working as an entry-level human resource professional for a large corporation based in Detroit. I was a driven young executive who was looking to move ahead fast. Yet even after two years of working hard, I felt senior executives either couldn't see or didn't value my potential. I became cynical about the company and my future with it.

In the spring of 1980, I was invited, along with twenty-three other professionals of color, to participate in what was then called an Efficacy course. I suspected that this seminar would be remedial. What made me show up despite my reservations was that I had previously heard the speaker, Dr. Jeff Howard. Most Black leaders of the day spoke about people of color as victims—a largely white society was to blame for what we didn't achieve. Not Dr. Howard. His focus was squarely on taking personal responsibility for one's own development. He didn't talk about what was wrong with other people or what the company ought to be doing differently. He told us that our success depended upon ourselves and the choices we made about how to think and behave. I was riveted by this thinking. Was it really up to me?

During the training, Dr. Howard elaborated on the topic of personal responsibility, and the meaning of what he called Efficacy became clearer to me. *The American Heritage Dictionary* defines efficacy as the "power or capacity to produce a desired effect." In

the context of the program, efficacy also means “a set of thoughts and behaviors that give you the highest return on the investment of your time and effort.”

I was struck that the definition didn’t say a good return or a high return, but the highest return. Efficacy was about leveraging my choices and my effort to maximize my development and not settling for less than I was capable of. It was about being strategic with that effort: defining what was important to me and developing a strategy that would produce the best outcomes with the least amount of wasted physical or emotional energy.

This experience had a profound impact on me. It helped me realize that I was concentrating much of my energy on what others weren’t doing right: they weren’t giving me a chance, they weren’t appreciating what I had to offer, and they weren’t treating me as someone with a brain. A key principle of the program is, It’s not the stimulus, it’s the response. This made it clear that I could choose how to respond to my environment and people I encounter every day. I did not have to let frustration, anger, or helplessness dictate my reaction. I could choose to respond to the unfortunate and unpleasant experiences of life, in a way that expanded my possibilities and moved me toward my desired outcomes. To this day, that core principle rings in my head whenever a situation isn’t progressing the way I would like it to.

I also came to understand the importance of fostering relationships with others, even those I might not like or choose to have as friends. I spent more time cultivating a “brand of excellence” with senior executives. I became much more willing to make mistakes, admit what I didn’t know, and learn from my errors. Perhaps most important, I began to seek out feedback constantly—even if I didn’t always like what I heard. I stopped waiting for others to discover me, and I stopped assuming that other people’s biases were holding me back. Instead, I started relying on my belief in my capacity to learn and improve and become increasingly more effective in accomplishing the goals that were important to the company and to me.

These strategies opened many doors for me. Through my efforts, and with the support of some wonderful mentors and coaches, I was rewarded with a satisfying and challenging career.

When I look back, I realize there were many starts and stops, many lessons I wish I had learned more quickly, and much advice I wish I'd received sooner. I'm grateful to the wonderful individuals who recognized my potential and helped me learn how to navigate my career. So this book is my effort to "pay it forward" and provide straightforward answers to the questions you might face as you immerse yourself in an often confusing and challenging workplace culture. It is about how to take informed personal responsibility for your career.

There are many books with good advice for attaining and managing a successful career. However, most of them do not address the challenges facing professionals who are underrepresented in the leadership of today's organizations. This book is intended as an open discussion about the deliberate choices that must be made about who you are and how to represent yourself in the organization you work for. It is about how to create options for yourself, consciously choose what's important to you, and decide how you will achieve your goals. Making these choices might require more work or numerous tradeoffs if your background and identity don't always square with your work culture. However, to ignore the challenge also means cutting yourself off from the possibility of reaching your full potential—and developing yourself to the fullest is the core message of this book.

The power of choice is not about becoming successful in spite of your differences or even because of your differences. It's about expanding your definition of who you are and who you can become.

It's about expanding your sense of possibilities for yourself.

In the first part of this book, we explore the foundational principles of the Power of Choice's approach to career development. In the second part, we discuss how to develop the skills—especially the relational and influence skills—that are required to shape the kind of career you want. We also examine the factors that sometimes undermine our efforts and stunt our momentum. At the end of each chapter, a summary highlights the key ideas explored and provides direction for using the Power of Choice principles to make decisions and navigate your development.

The third part of the book offers case studies to help you shape your reality in a way that sets you up for success.

Long-term career growth is never the result of luck; it's the result of conscious and deliberate choices. My intention is that by reading this book, you will become more aware of the choices you've made to date and the options that will best serve the vision you create for yourself. By honestly looking at the impact of your decisions—what's working and what could work better—you put yourself in a position to engage even more effectively than you have in the past. In areas where you're frustrated with your career, make different choices and get a different outcome. In areas where your choices are serving you well, be open to the possibility of an even bigger vision for yourself.

We can choose to be mediocre and to let our lives be limited by others, or we can choose to find out just how great we can be. I encourage you all to choose greatness.

PART



The Foundation

1

The Requirements for Career Success

AS INDIVIDUALS CONTEMPLATE their potential for success, they often wonder what's required. Individuals understandably want to know which skills will best advance their careers and earn just rewards for the effort. Women and others who are underrepresented in their organizations' leadership sometimes have additional concerns: Do I have to work twice as hard because of my race, gender, or background in order to be recognized and rewarded? Do some folks get better opportunities because of who they know rather than the skills they've developed?

At Korn Ferry, we've researched different kinds of organizations and the nuances of their cultures, and we've found there is a consistent pattern to the career trajectory of professionals whose skills are most developed and who are most respected. Regardless of their background or experience, and whether they've worked in large or small organizations, in for-profits or nonprofits, or in traditional or cutting-edge industries, successful professionals have all built their credibility and value by developing in three areas:

- **Technical Skills.** Technical proficiency is having the operational and analytical skills required to do a job. It refers to a person's

capability to do a job accurately, reliably, and efficiently, whether it's a highly process-driven set of responsibilities, such as issuing invoices, or a highly creative one, such as designing a new ad campaign. Individuals who are technically proficient are knowledgeable about their field of endeavor and are able to do their jobs with a high degree of excellence in order to succeed. If these professionals hadn't made the effort and commitment that enabled them to be very good at their jobs, there's little likelihood they would have been offered the opportunity to do more.

However, the mistake many professionals make, especially women and traditionally underrepresented groups, is to believe that technical skill alone guarantees they'll be recognized and rewarded. After developing a foundation of expertise in a field, professionals have to learn how to use that expertise in a manner that mobilizes others to act on their ideas. This is why the next two areas of competency are as important as technical competence.

- **Relational Skills.** Relational skills are the capability to relate to others and have others relate to you, whether or not you like one another. Organizations are made up of individuals who are expected to work together effectively. Because most people prefer to work with others they know and feel comfortable with, professionals who have developed relational skills, who can navigate across a wide variety of people and circumstances, tend to be the most sought after.
- **Influential Skills.** Influential proficiency is the capability to engineer mutually satisfactory solutions to problems. It requires the skills to sell ideas and to navigate an organization effectively in order to get things done. Individuals who can shape outcomes and engineer the engagement of others add more value to the organization than those who bring technical skills alone.

Organizations' expectations of individuals' contributions change over time. After professionals master the technical requirements of their role, the organization looks to them to influence the work of others and do more to advance the business's objectives. While professionals must be technically competent in order to

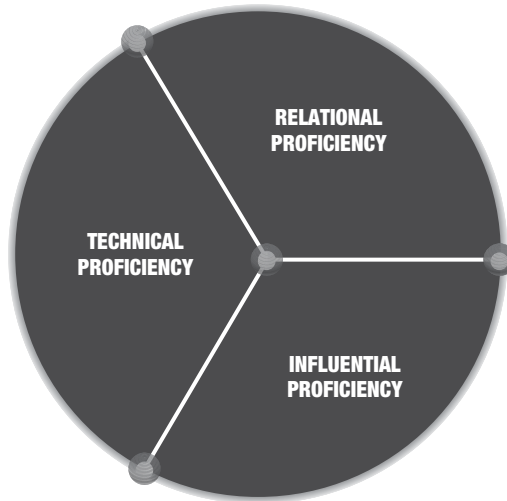


Figure 1.1

be credible, relational and influence skills tend to differentiate individuals who experience the greatest growth and satisfaction in their careers from those who are perceived as good, but not stellar, performers. (See Figure 1.1.)

These three fundamental competencies are the secret sauce of success and should be the focus of your development as a professional. Let's look a little more closely at each of these requirements.

Technical Skills

Mastery of the requirements of your job is critical. Your career will come to a standstill if you do not consistently and predictably deliver what is expected of you. Then you need to go one step further. You need to be known for being excellent at something important to the business. You want your name to come up when people are looking to solve a problem or take on new initiatives. Few opportunities and little support from others will come your way unless you show that you are someone worth investing in.

I learned this lesson about the importance of doing a good job early in my career, although I admit that at the time it was more about keeping my sanity than making a strategic move. One of my

first tasks as a newly hired human resources employee was to prepare data from manual personnel records for transfer to a new computer system. I was shown to a closet-sized room with no windows and one glaring overhead light. The room was piled high with dusty manila folders. My job was to go through the information in each folder and fill out a template for the computer technicians to use in data entry. Accuracy was of the utmost importance.

It was pure misery for me to sit for long hours and focus on these painstaking details. Furthermore, I was insulted by the assignment. This was boring clerical work, not an assignment fit for an aspiring executive.

As a survival tactic, I devised challenges to get through the day. How many records could I complete in an hour? Could I finish more today than I did yesterday? How could I reduce my error rate?

Later I discovered the value of my strategy to make the work interesting. I completed the task in about half the time the company expected, so it was able to move up the timeline for computerization of the personnel records. That got me recognized by the HR leaders as someone who worked hard and delivered excellent results. The job also helped me learn the names and expertise of people across the organization—knowledge that helped me make valuable connections as I moved on to other responsibilities.

What opportunities do you have right now to be first-rate in what you are doing, even if the task seems initially mundane or unimportant? How do your responsibilities contribute to the work of the business? I recently heard a radio interview with a young man who was responsible for loading pallets of roofing tiles into trucks for delivery. He reported that his job was “one of the most important ones in the company.” The interviewer quizzically asked why; many of us wouldn’t characterize truck loading as a critical job. The young man confidently replied that he was the last person who touched the roofing tiles before they went to the customer, so he was the one who ensured that customers got only quality tiles, not ones that were cracked or damaged. This was a man who clearly understood the value he brought to the business.

The more you understand how your work is connected to the organization’s purpose, the easier it will be to figure out what you

need to do well and how you can do it more effectively. Without such technical proficiency, the options you can command for yourself will be severely limited.

Technical Skills Are Not Enough

Although technical skills are necessary, I am continually struck by how many of us have been socialized by our families, our education systems, and even companies' professional development processes to believe that hard work and credentials are all that matter. Credentials get us in the door, and solid job expertise establishes our credibility. But technical proficiency isn't enough to earn us appreciation or get us promoted.

I recently counseled a young Asian American woman I'll call Joy. Joy worked for a well-known consulting company as a tax consultant. She had an Ivy League education and worked sixty to seventy hours a week as a matter of course. In her group, she was recognized as the go-to person for questions about tax law. She recognized the need to broaden her expertise if she was going to be considered for leadership positions within her organization, and she was outspoken about her frustration at being assigned to the same client with the same demand for long hours and little development opportunity. Joy was particularly bitter that a white male peer, whom she saw as being much less capable, had just been reassigned to a highly visible client engagement.

It's tempting to look at this situation and cry foul given Joy's depth of expertise and impressive work ethic. However, as we talked more, I learned that Joy seldom delegated work to others on her team. She told me, "My reputation rests on my work, and I can't risk letting someone else mess things up." When I asked if she interacted with anyone other than her client and those on her team, she said, "Given how much work I have, I have to prioritize how I spend my time." As her frustration grew, she was also vocal about her belief that "this company promotes incompetence."

Let's look at this from her leaders' point of view. What incentive is there to promote someone who works tirelessly at her current level and who has demonstrated limited capacity to support and develop

others? Furthermore, she comes across as cynical and bitter about the organization in general.

Joy was correct that others with less impressive credentials and time on the job were getting promoted. She made the mistake of believing that her expertise should automatically lead to expanding career opportunities—and that if it didn't, discrimination was at the root of her failure to advance. What she didn't see was that she had not provided any basis for her leaders to trust her with positions where she would influence and manage others. In addition, she had few connections who could provide access to additional opportunities and champion her candidacy.

In most organizations there are many technically proficient individuals. Decisions about who gets stretch assignments, special projects, or promotions generally involve the more subtle components of relational and influence skills.

Relational Skills

The second important area of professional development is relational proficiency: the capability to relate to others and have them relate to you. Imagine, for example, that you are heading up a project and you can hand-select your team. Wouldn't you be more likely to choose individuals you knew you could work with well? Wouldn't you want a group that you believed would accomplish its mission with a minimum of tension and discomfort?

It's human nature to prefer working with people you're familiar and comfortable with, which is often easier to do when you think they're "like you." It can be terrifying to walk into a room where there are few others like you. It takes courage to introduce yourself to a group of executives, especially when they are different from you in ethnicity or gender. For too many people, this discomfort means they avoid making the contacts and connections that could help build their careers. Instead of figuring out how to relate, they write off these relationships as too difficult or not worth the time. Then, unfortunately, they wonder why opportunities go to others.

Three years into my first job out of college, I attended a number of meetings where the company's chief financial officer spoke to

the group. CFO was a really big job to my young eyes. In addition, this fellow had been working in the company for a long time, had a larger-than-life personality, and was widely revered. Despite our being in a couple of meetings together, he would pass me in the hall and never say hello.

One day, after attending a company-wide meeting where this CFO spoke about the current quarterly results, I felt compelled to approach him. I went up and introduced myself, acknowledged how much I appreciated hearing from him as a young professional, and said I would love to meet him again some time to become better acquainted. I was shocked to hear him say, “That would be nice. I’ll have my secretary give you a call to arrange it.”

To my surprise, she called me later that same day to schedule a personal meeting with him for the following week. We spent an hour getting to know each other, sharing stories about our backgrounds and opinions about the company. A relationship was born that grew and lasted for years. His mentorship was invaluable as my career progressed.

A few years later I asked him why he agreed to meet, given how low I was on the organization chart. He said, “Because you asked me. No one else at your level had ever asked to meet with me, and it impressed me that you would.” He also shared that he enjoyed getting to know me and as he learned more about me, it made him more aware of how he could support my dreams.

It was at that moment when I realized the significance of building relationships at all levels of the organization. Such relationships help build your understanding of the culture, how things get done, and what you have to do to add value. Relationships allow you to be present in the minds and actions of others. They expand the number of individuals who represent you in critical conversations about your contributions and potential. I know my company seriously considered me for opportunities because of the CFO’s support. And he was better able to assess how I could add value because he was familiar with my skills and capabilities. Who would be willing to support your development if you reached out to them?

The development of relational skills is critical—perhaps even more critical than becoming technically proficient. Like the

development of any skill, these take time and effort, but the payoff is mutually beneficial relationships with people who will champion you and your goals.

Influential Skills

The third necessary area of professional development is influential: the capability to shape opinions, inspire action, and successfully navigate the formal and informal processes of an organization. Influentially skilled people understand how systems work. They leverage situations and manage relationships to achieve desired outcomes. They position themselves and their ideas to elicit the support of others.

Being influential is often undervalued and derided as brown nosing. People are criticized for playing politics. Yet those who can sell ideas, shape opinions, and engineer mutually satisfactory solutions to problems bring more to the table than those who are only technically proficient. Wouldn't you rather partner with someone who can secure the necessary resources or provide challenging learning opportunities instead of someone who is knowledgeable but ill-equipped to make things happen? Wouldn't you prefer to work for a leader who can influence a team to work together productively rather than one who is merely an expert in the field? Wouldn't you rather surround yourself with individuals who will advocate for you? Securing resources, bringing a project to fruition, guiding a cohesive team—all these things require influence skills, and most of us want to be involved with others who can exert this kind of leverage.

The capability to influence situations, outcomes, and people increases your value to an organization. When you have the capability to do your job well, your value equals that of your independent contribution. When you are also effective in understanding what motivates others and can increase their engagement and productivity, your value equals your contribution plus theirs. (See Figure 1.2.) Mastering the art of influencing others, regardless of their level or rank, differentiates the average from the great.

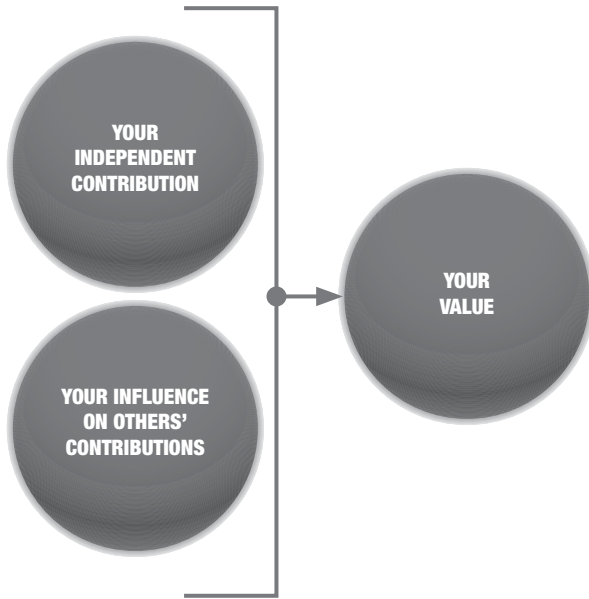


Figure 1.2

Yet many professionals assume that they have to have a high-level title or many direct reports before they can or should exercise influence. As a result, many individuals miss opportunities to develop the influence skills that enable them to accelerate their careers. They don't offer their good ideas because they're not the ones in charge. They feel they have to put up with unreceptive bosses or difficult work groups. When you can look at challenges as opportunities to improve influence skills rather than as situations outside your control, you are much more likely to figure out approaches that will persuade others to adopt your point of view or create more productive working relationships.

Almost all positions afford opportunities to learn how to influence others. Perhaps you want to convince others to go along with a process change or shape the entry of a new person into your work group. Maybe you have a recommendation for a new product or service, or you have a suggestion for enhancing an existing one. These are all good opportunities to practice influencing others.

I recently spoke with a young supervisor in the distribution warehouse for a consumer goods company. He had been assigned to a committee tasked with finding ways to reengineer some of the company's processes; the company wanted people who actually did the work—and this fellow was one of those people. This young man was convinced it would all be a waste of time and asked me how he could gracefully decline.

I encouraged him to stick it out, enjoy the visibility it offered, and look for ways to actively participate. I suggested he start by looking for clues to each person's short- and long-term interests relative to this project. What did each of them envision as the benefits to the company if the group was successful? What were the personal and professional benefits each envisioned attaining? What was each person's point of view? What information did he have access to, given his position, that the other members of the group didn't?

He took my advice and adopted a new outlook. He not only looked for clues at meetings but he also went out of his way to have at least one discussion with each member outside the formal meetings. People got to know him as an individual, and he grew in his understanding of how they thought and what was important to them.

There was a moment when he recognized an opportunity for an improvement with one of the processes. I watched him muster the nerve and confidence to strategically position his idea in the context of what he had learned about the other members of the task force and how it could contribute to the outcomes mentioned by many of them. He was amazed to see people respond so favorably to an idea he proposed. Eventually, a version of his idea was implemented. Imagine what that did for his confidence—and his standing in the company.

What's Required for Success?

I've found that many professionals from a variety of backgrounds initially balk at this emphasis on relational and influence skills. After all, technical skills are easier to measure and evaluate. Organizations place a lot of emphasis on technical skills when outlining required credentials or explaining the rationale behind

certain promotion decisions. Yet, in practice, the more subjective relational and influence skills often determine who is given new opportunities. When you choose to develop these skills, you have more control over your own career. You're better able to create momentum and make a bigger impact.

Given their importance, I've devoted entire chapters to relational and influence skills. Chapter 6 is about how to develop meaningful connections based on trust and shared objectives. In Chapter 7, I offer guidance on how to develop the influence skills that allow you to shape your reality rather than react to it.

The good news is that these relational and influence skills are learnable. No matter what assumptions you've made about your capability to be a socially graceful or compelling personality, you can become more adept at making connections and mobilizing the minds and actions of others. It will require your effort and attention. It will require practice and making some mistakes along the way. The payoff, however, will be a greater capacity to have a meaningful impact—on your own behalf and on behalf of your organization.

The Power of Choice

Adopt Key Ideas

- Technical proficiency is absolutely required for career success. The most highly valued people in today's organizations also develop the relational and influence skills to interact effectively and shape the work and opinions of others.
- By developing all three areas of proficiency—technical, relational, and influential—you can increase your options and engineer the career that is most satisfying to you.

Begin Now

- In which area do you feel most skillful? How do you leverage your skill in order to accomplish what's important to you?
- In what area would you like to grow your comfort and expertise?
- What steps will you take to practice and build your skill in this area?
- What will be the benefit of extending this effort?

2

Believe You Have What It Takes

YOU ARE CAPABLE of learning whatever is necessary to achieve your goals. You are capable of becoming the person you dream to be.

When you embrace this belief at your core—at an emotional level, not only a cognitive one—you are better able to sustain the commitment and motivation necessary to engineer your vision. You're able to lean into the challenges inherent in crafting the life you desire. You know that your capacity to learn what's required isn't limited by your hard-wiring. Your development is determined by the nature of your effort—by what you do to stretch yourself. Your growth is governed by what you learn from your experience.

As you navigate the increasing challenges of an advancing career, profound belief in your capacity to learn can be hard to sustain. I've been struck by how often even the most accomplished professionals confess to having moments of doubt about some aspect of their abilities. Time and time again, folks who have received that sought-after promotion have confided, "I'm not sure I've got what it takes to make it at this level." It's one of those dirty little secrets none of us likes to talk about. We put on a good front, but how often do we drive home wondering if we're smart enough or tough enough or skilled enough to succeed in some new challenge that has surfaced in our jobs?

What's the root of this phenomenon? What causes accomplished individuals to harbor doubts about their abilities in some situations? Why are otherwise confident professionals sometimes stymied by a sense of limitation at critical junctures in their careers?

The Fixed-Capacity Mindset

Our doubts about our ability to succeed can be traced to the pervasive and underlying belief in our society that some people have “it”—mental and emotional intelligence—but most people don't, or at least not in abundance. We've been socialized to believe that each of us has some collection of natural gifts and talents. Some of us are smart. Others are natural-born leaders. Still others are inherently creative. Conversely, we assume that each of us has innate limitations—and that there is little we can do to overcome them.

The belief that learning capacity and important job-related abilities are permanent, unchanging characteristics is called a fixed-capacity mindset. (See Figure 2.1.) In this way of thinking, professionals with a high capacity for learning (“naturally smart people”) will be able to master the increasingly complex demands of their careers. Individuals with less capacity will eventually tap out; they will reach their “level of incompetence,” and by virtue of their limited innate ability, they will find it very difficult—if not impossible—to develop the level of expertise needed at the more demanding levels of responsibility.

With a fixed-capacity mindset, failure is viewed as evidence that a job or task is beyond a person's ability. Since ability is a permanent

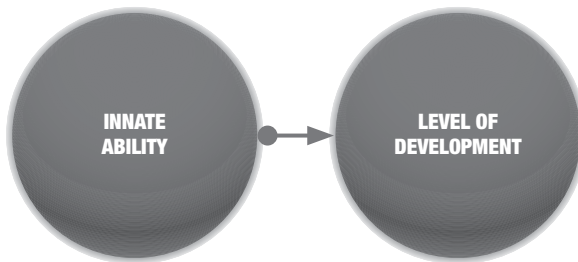


Figure 2.1

characteristic, the person who can't do it now probably won't be able to learn to do it in the future either. From an early age, others judge our level of mental and emotional intelligence. By the time we reach adulthood, most of us have internalized these assessments and accepted the assumptions about our natural gifts and talents and about those areas in which we can't quite measure up.

A while back, our firm consulted with one of the world's premier research facilities. All the scientists had one or more advanced degrees from top educational institutions, years of experience, and multiple patents. We had assumed that at this elite research institution, we would find folks with considerable confidence in their potential for high levels of performance. Yet even here, these highly competent, highly educated PhDs were often demoralized when they suspected that colleagues had gotten more challenging projects or made more significant breakthroughs because they were "smarter," more capable researchers. It reminded us that the fear of reaching the limits of one's potential affects everyone—even some of the most proficient individuals in the world.

This fear is a consequence of a fixed-capacity mindset. It primes us to be on the lookout for our shortcomings. When we spot them, perhaps because we've experienced a few disappointments or are challenged by the demands of a new opportunity, we're susceptible to believing our natural abilities have played themselves out and that we've arrived at our personal limit. It seems logical then to avoid working in situations that require those skills. Why waste time and effort in an area where we believe we are doomed to inferior results?

A fixed-capacity mindset is destructive to our confidence and inhibits our efforts to learn and grow. It feeds insecurity. And most significantly, it is an inaccurate way to think about our potential for growth and development.

The Capacity-Building Mindset

Research in brain development and skill acquisition increasingly confirms that a capacity-building mindset is a more accurate way to represent the potential of human beings to learn and grow.

A capacity-building mindset holds that human capacities are not fixed. Most people can rapidly develop new skills and capabilities; they can learn to be highly effective at a variety of complex and challenging new tasks. Sustained involvement in challenging tasks and regular practice of new and difficult skills stimulate the development of capabilities. In other words, learning is based on effective effort, not fixed abilities. (See Figure 2.2.) That means just about everyone can learn whatever is necessary to do his or her job, contribute to the organization’s objectives, and prepare for increased levels of complexity and responsibility if he or she applies effective effort to meeting the challenges.

We understand we have to learn to drive a car by getting behind the wheel and practicing. Job-related skills are no different. We have to work at them, make mistakes, and use the lessons we learn to become more expert. The more we practice, and the more opportunities we have to learn, the more developed we will become.

In their *Freakonomics* column titled “A Star Is Made,” which appeared in the *New York Times Magazine* on May 7, 2006, Stephen Dubner and Steven Levitt focused on Anders Ericsson, a professor who studies Expert Performance, the science of examining what makes individuals good at what they do. As the authors explained, Ericsson’s research demonstrates that practice and effort—not innate ability—are the key differentiators in levels of accomplishment.

Ericsson’s research pointed out that a large percentage of the world’s elite soccer players were born in the first three months of the year. What impact could birth date possibly have on the

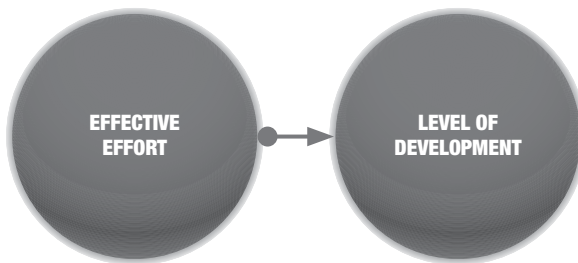


Figure 2.2

development of outstanding soccer skills? It turns out that the cutoff for age-based youth league assignments in most countries is December 31. So children born in the early months of the year had more time to develop their muscles and physical coordination by the time player selections were made—they were almost a year older than the children born late in the year. These bigger, more mature players were more likely to get selected for the most competitive teams beginning in early grade school. Dubner and Levitt made clear what effect that has: “Once chosen, those January-born players are the ones who, year after year, receive the training, the deliberate practice and the feedback—to say nothing of the accompanying self-esteem—that will turn them into elites.”

Even something that on the surface appears to be a function of innate ability—a high level of soccer-playing potential—turns out to be a function of practice and effort. Older players have had more time to develop coordination and to mature physically. Then, because of their inclusion on the most demanding teams, they get more practice competing at the most challenging levels of play. The more rigorous the training, the more developed the player.

In his research, Ericsson credibly demonstrated in a wide variety of fields—chess, golf, surgery, stock-picking, and software design—that deliberate practice (what we call effective effort) is the most significant factor in determining one’s level of development. Regardless of the perceived level of innate ability at the beginning of a learning process, those who become the most capable are those who set specific goals, study the feedback they receive, and concentrate on incrementally improving their strategy or technique over time.

Effective Effort Drives Development

I can’t make this point strongly enough: You have enough ability to develop in whatever areas are important to your success. What it takes is your commitment and willingness to apply effective effort. Development comes from being devoted to the practice of improving yourself.

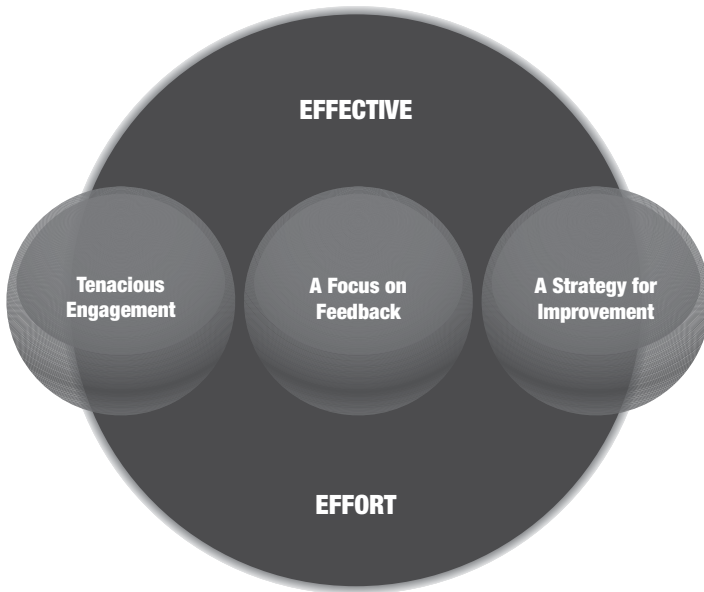


Figure 2.3

Effective effort is much more than working hard. Effective effort is directed and strategic. It's marked by three characteristics. (See Figure 2.3.)

- **Commitment.** To develop your skills and abilities, you have to commit fully to learning. You have to be “all in”—willing to give your time, discretionary energy, and thoughtful observation to the process. Simply put, you have to tenaciously engage in getting better.
- **A Focus on Feedback.** Every situation in which you are involved teaches you something. Study your results. What happened? Why did it happen? What feedback and coaching can you get from others? What does all this information tell you about how to improve?
- **A Strategy for Improvement.** Use the feedback you receive to set priorities and formulate a strategy for developing your skills and talents. What do you need to do differently in order to be more effective?

We often overlook—or even discount—the impact of focused effort when we’re confronted with differences in skill proficiency. A chess master typically has been playing for ten years, often four to six hours a day, from a very early age. Such a player has had significant opportunity to study patterns in moves and to learn to anticipate the impact of certain strategies. Certainly, he or she will be much more proficient than the casual chess player who plays a game or two a month. The difference is time and effort rather than innate intellectual ability.

We also don’t consider that the “numbers genius” in the finance department spends hours studying complex spreadsheets and so learns to see the patterns and trends. And we don’t take into account that the “natural-born leader” might have started bossing her younger brother around when she was four years old, honed her skills as president of her high school class, and went on to form a new club in college. We look at her in her first job and label her as a natural leader. Unfortunately, neither she nor those around her fully understand that her leadership skills were years in the making.

I have seen the impact of focused effort and practice in my own life. When I began making presentations to groups, I did a mediocre job. Speaking to fellow professionals and executives was a new undertaking for me, but I was overly confident in my interpersonal skills. I thought I could show up, notes in hand, and impress the audience with my insights and charm.

At first, I was tempted to ignore the audience reactions that were telling me I needed to do a better job. Then I realized that a colleague, Corine, was getting much better reviews than I was. The reason? When Corine was scheduled for a major presentation, she set up several internal opportunities to practice. During those sessions, she asked for the group’s insights and questions about the topic and adjusted her presentation based on their input.

Corine also reached out to the communications experts in our company and asked for coaching. She received suggestions for how to stand, make eye contact with the audience, and use her PowerPoint slides more effectively. Her committed effort and voracious use of the feedback resulted in her rapidly becoming a more effective public speaker.

I realized that if I was going to accomplish my career goals, I needed to improve my presentation skills. I began scheduling my own practice sessions, requesting coaching, and incorporating the advice I received. Gradually, I became a much better keynote speaker. I continue to be amazed when someone calls me a natural at public speaking when nothing could be further from the truth. It was practice, practice, practice.

I encourage you to look at those areas where you might be settling for an average or even mediocre level of expertise because you have come to believe that your talents lie elsewhere—or because you have been unwilling to commit the effort required. What difference might it make if you were to engage more fully, look for more opportunities to practice, and focus on strategies for improvement?

I'm not saying that there are no differences in capability. There are some third graders who read better than others. There are professionals who can repair a piece of equipment more quickly than their peers or make a more compelling presentation. Rather, my point is that your current level of capability, in any area, is not predictive of how much further you will be able to develop. Many slow readers in early grade school become accomplished, intellectually adept professionals. Many senior executives in charge of millions of dollars in revenue were once considered average students. Many shy individuals learn the art of relationship-building and exert broad influence in their fields. The variable is their incremental efforts to improve over time. In his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell repeatedly mentions the “10,000-hour rule,” claiming that the key to success in any field is, to a large extent, a matter of practicing a specific task for 10,000 hours. Whether or not 10,000 hours is the right figure, the point is well taken: differences in levels of development are largely a function of the quality and quantity of effort, much more so than the level of innate talent. If you're willing to immerse yourself, learn from your mistakes, and improve over time, you will become proficient.

Failure and Difficulty as Feedback

One of the most striking differences between the impact of a fixed-capacity mindset and a capacity-building mindset is how each way of thinking affects our use of the feedback required to grow and learn, especially when that feedback comes in the form of a failure or setback.

When you have a fixed-capacity mindset, you interpret a failure or difficulty as evidence that you don't have what it takes to be successful in a particular area. (See Figure 2.4.) You then avoid working on those tasks that require the expertise you don't have—and believe you have little potential of learning. Soon, failure becomes a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy: you believe that you lack ability in some area, you avoid working on tasks where that lack might be exposed, and you don't improve because you have no opportunity to learn from your mistakes and improve the effectiveness of your effort.

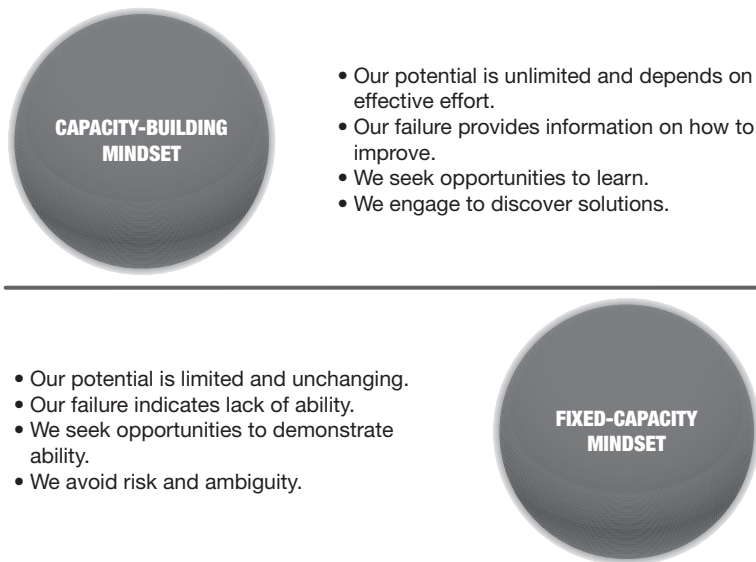


Figure 2.4

In contrast, when you have a capacity-building mindset, a failure or difficulty provides information about how to improve. It's the gold you mine to determine what you need to do differently. If your proposed layout for an ad campaign is rejected, you don't say, "I'm a bad graphic designer." Rather, you assess—and, ideally, ask others to assess—which elements of your design might have been effective, which fell short, and why.

The psychological shift is huge. In a fixed-capacity mindset, failure and difficulty are embarrassing, even shameful; they expose inadequacies we believe we have little ability to improve. In a capacity-building mindset, difficulty has a much different sting. It might be frustrating, it might be temporarily embarrassing, but it's also information about how to improve. The feedback directs and focuses our effort; it helps us make our approach more effective. It doesn't tell us to stop working, and it certainly doesn't confirm any permanent limitations.

Fixed-capacity reasoning sets up a damaging Catch-22 around the need to work hard at something and our willingness to practice diligently. In fixed-capacity thinking, one of the indicators of "natural ability" is ease of execution. If we can perform a task easily—if we can analyze a set of numbers quickly or ad lib a presentation without much advance preparation—then we assume we have a natural talent in that area. If we have to work hard and put in long hours to be effective, it's seen as an indication that we're not naturally talented in this area. It's no wonder then why it's hard to muster the motivation and perseverance to learn something new when the effort only reminds us that we don't quite measure up.

To make matters worse, if we avoid working in some area, our estimation of our ability becomes true over time. Our skills stagnate and we don't develop new competencies. However, this underdevelopment is not because of any innate lack of ability. Rather, it is because we avoided the very challenges that allow us to learn new skills—an unfortunate consequence of a fixed-capacity mindset.

Notice your reactions when you're faced with some new challenge. Do you feel your energy expand? Are you looking forward to mastering the challenge?

If your answer is yes, it's likely you're operating from a capacity-building mindset: you believe you are capable of learning and this challenge is an opportunity to expand your skills.

If you feel your energy and effort contract, however, and you move away from the challenge, you're probably operating from a fixed-capacity mindset.

For many of us, it is tough to fully accept that we are capable of learning whatever is required to respond to a challenge or reach our dreams. But I encourage you to choose to believe in your potential for greatness. Pick one area where you want to grow and develop. Engage fully in learning, study the feedback you get from your own experience, and zealously ask for feedback from others. Then apply what you learn to improve incrementally. You're likely to be amazed at just how good you can be.

The Power of Choice

Adopt Key Ideas

- You have enough mental capacity to develop high-level professional skills. To learn and grow, you need to apply effective effort.
- Stretch yourself to learn something new, study the feedback you receive from your experience, and apply what you learn to improve incrementally over time.
- Failure and difficulty are not indications of any permanent lack of ability. Rather, they provide feedback about how you need to refine the nature of your effort.

Begin Now

- Identify an area where you are confident in your capacity to perform well. How have you developed this level of expertise? What has supported your confidence so that you could develop in this area?

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- Now think of an area where you are less confident in your capacity to be effective. How are your effort and level of engagement in this area different from the one in which you have more confidence in your capabilities?
- Tell yourself that you are capable of improving in this area. If you let yourself believe this, how could it impact your willingness to engage in tasks that will support your learning? What specific actions could you take to learn and grow in this area?

3

The Power of the Message

IN SPITE OF all the progress we've made in becoming a truly diverse society, there are still lingering questions—spoken and unspoken—about the abilities of certain groups. Are individuals from certain schools, cultures, or a particular socioeconomic status better prepared for the rigors of a career? Can women make the tough calls that are necessary at the highest corporate levels? Can professionals of color lead effectively in traditionally white organizations? At one time or another, most of us have had to confront stereotypes like these in order to secure the opportunities and recognition we deserve.

Having to prove we are capable and committed can be frustrating and draining, but the greater harm happens when we let others' doubts creep into our psyches—when we begin to seriously question whether we're smart enough or bold enough or creative enough to attain our goals. Internalizing those doubts begins to undermine our confidence, and when that happens, our development is at risk.

Almost all of us can recount a situation where our abilities were questioned and the doubts affected our mindset and effort. I have a particularly painful and striking example from early in my career as a human resources manager. I felt I had conquered the demands of my position at the time, and I was eager for more challenges

and new responsibilities. So I was excited when Bob, my vice president, announced he was recruiting for a new director-level position. I thought this was a chance to advance my career.

I still vividly remember discussing the opportunity with Bob and the sting of being told I was “intellectually weak” and didn’t “have the bandwidth for the job.” He told me that my current position was the peak of my potential and that he expected me to assist him in recruiting and hiring the director who would eventually become my new boss.

I was devastated. And I accepted that what he had said to me was true. I began forgetting simple tasks. I was reluctant to speak up in meetings for fear of appearing dumb. I began to question whether I was cut out for corporate life. Every day was a struggle to get out of bed to come to work, and I felt pretty defeated about where my life might go.

Fortunately for me, Bob was replaced by Susan, a vice president from our corporate finance department. Susan had never worked in the human resources division before, so the first thing she did was to reach out to her direct reports to ask for our collective experience to assist her in building the best department possible. I remember thinking, “She assumes I have something to offer.” With just that little acknowledgment of my value, it got easier to get out of bed in the morning.

Susan also revealed that she was aware of my interest in the new director position and didn’t want to make a decision until she had given me an opportunity to demonstrate my capabilities. She even went one step further: she reassured me she’d partner with me to develop the needed skills. I can’t tell you how awesome I felt after that meeting. Not only was Susan giving me a chance, but she was actively supporting my success.

Susan was true to her word. She took the time to explain the big picture behind her decisions. She asked me for my perspective. She gave me assignments that stretched me and increased my visibility among other senior executives.

As you can imagine, my confidence returned with this kind of partnership. Coming to work was fun again. I worked doubly hard

to be effective, and I did everything in my power to aid her success in her new role. You should have seen the tears in my eyes when I was promoted to director six months later.

As I think back on my experience now, I'm struck by the realization that I had the same set of talents and potential when Bob chopped away at my belief in myself as I did when Susan positioned me for success. The difference was that I let Bob's assessment of my abilities destroy my confidence and undermine my efforts. For a while, I let his negative expectations determine who I was and how I performed. His messages hit some vulnerability in me at a time when there weren't a lot of young Black men in corporate America and I was still struggling to establish myself and ground my professional identity. I often wonder where my career would have gone if Bob hadn't been replaced.

I've heard countless stories like my own. Some professionals recount a positive ending; others are still struggling to let go of negative beliefs they've internalized about themselves, sometimes going back to childhood. It is inevitable that we will experience some level of difficulty when we're stretching ourselves to take on new and demanding challenges. And it's probable that we will experience some level of judgment and doubts from others. We can't control the assumptions others make about us, but we can control the impact of these messages. We can be intentional about how we respond when others expect less of us than we are truly capable of. My dream is for no one to be dependent on a manager like Susan appearing on the scene to perform at his or her best.

A Downward Spiral

Here's the pattern that typically emerges when someone overtly or subtly raises doubts about our abilities or expresses low expectations in an area where we're vulnerable: The doubts and low expectations erode confidence and undermine our efforts. Because our effort is compromised, our performance is less likely to be satisfactory, which confirms the original low expectations—in our minds and in the minds of others. (See Figure 3.1.) The cycle can then

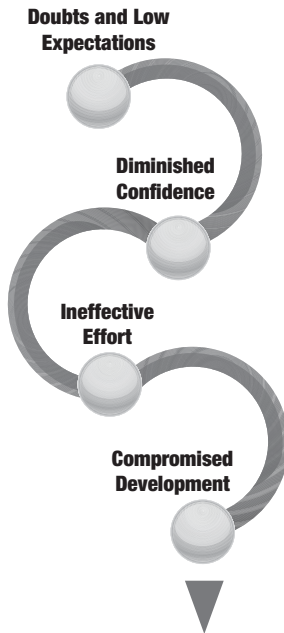


Figure 3.1

become self-sustaining because we've internalized the low expectations. Even after there's no longer a Bob in the picture, we doubt ourselves and our capabilities.

Low expectations are seldom as stark as those that I received from Bob. Usually, they are more subtle, but they can be equally capable of damaging your belief in yourself. Your manager might ask who helped you with a project or why you think you can lead a team. Other times, you might detect doubt in a colleague's voice, notice that you're not considered for opportunities as regularly as your peers, or observe that few professionals like you have been successful in a particular role or at a particular level of leadership. Sometimes it's just the feeling of invisibility; no one notices you. You have the title but not the authority; people make decisions without you.

Some of the negative messages you receive might even be well intentioned. Family or friends advise you not to take a promotion and "avoid all that stress." Or colleagues tell you to pass on

a challenging opportunity because “it will never get you anything but trouble.” These types of counsel might be intended to protect us from disappointment or failure, but they nevertheless convey a negative assessment of our potential for success and discourage the risk-taking that promotes growth.

Sometimes negative external messages have minimal impact. We become frustrated or angry that we have to address them again and again, but overall, they don’t affect our confidence in our capabilities or our commitment to developing them.

Other times, we are vulnerable. We remember a parent or teacher who doubted us. We recall a past failure or difficulty. We focus on some problem we’re currently having and wonder whether the low assessment of our ability could be true. Or perhaps at some level we’ve absorbed the stereotyped messages. The result is that our confidence in our ability to be successful is compromised. We start to doubt ourselves.

When we begin to wonder whether others’ doubts about our abilities could be true, the resulting anxiety and tension impede our best efforts.

I was reminded of this when a colleague of mine was agonizing about her ten-year-old son’s batting slump in Little League. He’d had several at-bats where he missed the ball and struck out. At first, he was disappointed. But now his fear of not hitting the ball had begun to overwhelm his ability to react to a pitch. He was stuck in a downward spiral: strikes produced anxiety, which crippled his ability to perform, in turn producing more anxiety and more strikes. And because he was in a slump, the coach wasn’t playing him as much since he couldn’t count on him to get a hit.

Low expectations can create the professional equivalent of a batter’s slump. Our focus is divided between worrying about failing and actually working on the challenges of the situation. So our effort is compromised—and ultimately so is the outcome.

Then, faced with less than stellar performance, we have to explain our lack of success. We’ve already been primed to view the situation as one where there’s some deficiency on our part. So we’re likely to confirm in our minds the initial negative expectations we

received from others. The downward spiral is now complete: we've internalized the original low expectations.

Creating an Upward Spiral

How do we break this downward spiral and create an upward one? How do we maintain the confidence we need to pursue our development? In short, by embracing the capacity-building mindset—the belief that we can learn any skill, provided we use failure as feedback and invest effort to improve. (See Figure 3.2.) A capacity-building mindset makes us less vulnerable to external questions about our capabilities. It allows us to focus on the effort required to learn and develop new skills.

I recently coached Alberto, an Argentinean by birth, who had made a presentation to a group of leaders. When it wasn't going well, his manager jumped in and took over the discussion and then

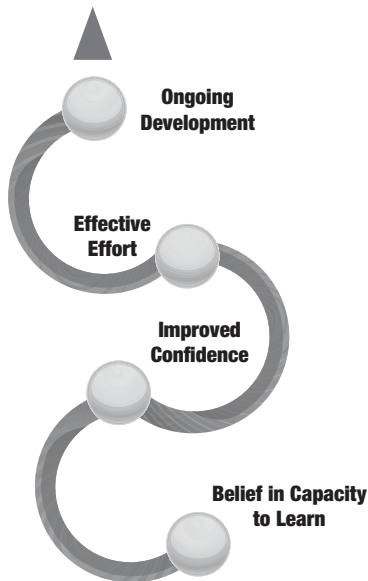


Figure 3.2

gave him some pointed criticism about how he handled the group. As a result, Alberto concluded his accent and poor communication skills prevented him from taking on any leadership roles that involved public speaking. (Notice the big leap he had made from a presentation that didn't go well to assessing his leadership potential in general!) Our conversations helped him make a more objective assessment of his situation. He realized that it was more accurate to say, "Day to day, I communicate effectively. However, when I'm nervous, I speak too quickly, and it's hard for others to understand me. I need to practice the strategies that help me be at ease in front of a group." I encouraged him to look for new opportunities to practice his presentation skills rather than prematurely closing doors. Once he builds up his confidence, he'll be ready to take on more visible leadership roles.

You can't eliminate stereotypes and low expectations. You can, however, become more aware of how these subtle messages affect your confidence

The greater your awareness of the dynamics created by low expectations, the better you can intervene to shore up your confidence and commitment to develop your abilities. Awareness gives you greater choice in how you respond. Will you succumb to the low expectations of others or choose to believe in your potential for learning and development?

Tell-Tale Signs of the Impact of Low Expectations

Often, the first signal that low expectations have affected your self-confidence is that you avoid or procrastinate on some task. You might even devise a variety of seemingly reasonable explanations for your behavior. You tell yourself that the challenge in front of you really isn't an area of interest, it's not important to your advancement, or you don't have time. If you're serious about your development, get serious about realizing when you're making excuses or rationalizations rather than confronting your fears and pursuing your development.

Over the years, I've asked many groups about their behavior when they are questioning their capacity to succeed. According to one group, at such a time they are most likely to:

- Stay busy but never find time for the things that are most critical
- Avoid the project or withdraw
- Tell themselves their family needs them and they shouldn't take on a new opportunity
- Not take any risks and play it safe
- Take unrealistic risks so they can't be blamed if they fail
- Dress, talk, or act in a way that puts others off
- Avoid feedback and deny that there are areas in which they need to improve

One of the women in the group even confided that she had four children—each five years apart. Every time her youngest child was entering kindergarten, she acknowledged that she would contemplate returning to the paid workforce. Although the prospect of returning to work excited her, it also scared her. So, in retrospect, she realized she resolved the issue by becoming pregnant. Certainly with a new baby on the way, it was no time to face the uncertainty of a new job.

Deciding to have a baby, turn down an assignment, or stay in the same job is not necessarily an indication that you're avoiding a challenge, but it could be. If you're serious about advancing your career and going after what's important to you, be honest with yourself. Are you making excuses for why you're not investing fully in some endeavor when in reality you're doubting yourself or fearing the possibility of failure? Such misgivings are normal; we all experience them. However, you can choose how you respond. Will you let your possibilities be driven by others' low expectations and your own fears? Or will you take the risk of engaging in challenging opportunities that feed your growth and development?

Each of us has to decide what we want to accomplish and make decisions and choices that honor those goals. We all have to develop the emotional and intellectual resilience to confront stereotypes,

embrace new and challenging tasks, and risk failure. We have to trust that we can develop the skills necessary to be successful in whatever endeavors we undertake. For only by making a strong commitment to our development and taking those risks can we develop the skills that prove to ourselves, and others, that we have the capacity to be the person we dream of being.

The Power of Choice

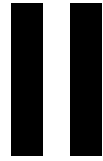
Adopt Key Ideas

- It's not the stimulus, it's the response. Regardless of what others say or do, your power to engineer your desired outcomes rests on how you respond.
- Be on the lookout for signals that low expectations are eroding your confidence or compromising the effectiveness of your effort.
- Don't let others diminish your belief in your potential to develop. Be willing to risk engaging in challenging opportunities that grow your capacity.

Begin Now

- What messages have you received, directly or indirectly, about the possibilities for people "like you"?
- How have these messages affected the decisions you've made in your life? Have they had an impact, for example, on the opportunities you've tried or those you've passed on, or the responsibilities you've gravitated toward or avoided?
- Are there any areas where you feel you've limited your options because of the impact of these messages?
- Now that you're more aware of the effect of these messages, what expanded choices might be available to you? How could you take action to expand your development?

PART



Choose Your Strategy

4

Build Confidence

IN GENERAL DISCUSSION, most of us use the word “confidence” to mean that I believe I can accomplish a particular task or goal now—at this moment. The Power of Choice expands that definition to include the belief that I can learn how to perform a job or achieve an objective, even if I can’t do it now. Believing you can learn is the true essence of confidence.

Confidence based solely on what you can accomplish now is limited. Confidence based on the belief that you can learn is boundless.

When you believe in your capacity to improve, you soak up the feedback that allows you to learn. True confidence predisposes you to ask yourself: What information can I take from this experience that will enable me to be more effective the next time? How can I improve my effort and my outcomes? Whether you succeed or fail, every experience teaches you something about how to engage more effectively the next time. Your expanding expertise in turn reinforces your confidence and improves your results. The cycle becomes self-reinforcing.

Two factors are critical to building robust confidence. The first is self-talk: what you tell yourself about why you succeed or fail. The second is the support of those around you. You have significant control over both of these factors. Let’s start with self-talk.

Self-Talk

Self-talk is that inner dialogue about why we had the outcomes we did. It's the conversation we have with ourselves in the quiet of the car or train ride home—one that can be very different from the discussion we have with our managers or peers about those same successes or failures. These conversations with ourselves can take us in two directions: one that erodes our confidence and another that builds our confidence and feeds our perseverance and resilience.

A key strategy for building confidence is to become more aware of the explanations you give yourself about success and failure so that you can be more intentional in your self-talk.

Confidence-Eroding Self-Talk

I'm Not Good Enough For most of us, the most vulnerable time for our confidence is after a failure (or any situation where our outcomes don't match our own or others' expectations). Telling yourself you failed because you lack ability is the most damaging and limiting kind of self-talk. Inner dialogue such as "I've always had trouble ...," "I'm not the kind who can ...," "I'm not good at ...," or "I never could ..." reinforces a belief that you don't have the ability to accomplish a particular type of task and you're not likely to have it in the future.

Once you accept the erroneous belief that you are inadequate for the demands of any particular situation, it's logical to avoid that kind of challenge—which, in turn, erodes your confidence.

It's Bad Luck, or It's Out of My Control Explaining a result in terms of something outside our control is also common after a failure. Individuals often use reasons such as "My manager didn't support me," "It was an unreceptive group," or "The process was faulty." They might also attribute a failure to having a bad day or bad luck.

It might be true that the expectations were unrealistic or that the process was faulty, but if your self-talk stops there, it's unlikely the experience will expand your sense of control or increase your

confidence in the possibility of engineering a better outcome in the future.

Remember, one of the key principles of *The Power of Choice* is this: It's not the stimulus, it's the response. Self-talk focused on external circumstances or luck emphasizes the stimulus. It draws our energy toward what is being done to us rather than toward the possibilities for improvement or greater control. To build confidence and direct our attention toward a useful response, it's important to explain our failures in terms of something we can change going forward. The only thing we can change is the nature of our effort.

Confidence-Building Self-Talk

Own Your Successes Building confidence starts long before a failure. It starts with owning your successes, with acknowledging that you are a capable individual who made the effort and used the right approach to reach your desired outcome. Celebrating our role in engineering our successes (rather than ignoring them or telling ourselves we were lucky) gives us the evidence that we can learn to be effective.

For many of us, owning our successes runs counter to messages we received growing up about being humble and not getting a big head. We were taught not to take our accomplishments too seriously. We are encouraged to give credit to our team and our mentors. It's great to acknowledge the conditions that facilitated a success or to congratulate your team for the role they played in a project win, but you also have to acknowledge, at least to yourself, the value of your own efforts in shaping those circumstances that supported your success. Giving proper weight to your own accomplishments—and your potential for continued growth—establishes an important foundation for confidence.

What Did I Learn? How Can I Do It Better? The most confidence-building self-talk after a failure starts with the belief that failure is feedback about how to improve your effort in the future. Failure is not an indication of your worth. It's not a confirmation of your lack of ability, and it's not a prediction of your

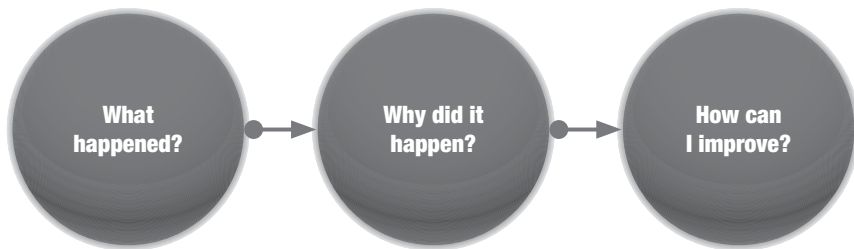


Figure 4.1

future potential. It's only data about those areas where you need to do more learning and growing. Failure is rarely permanently career damaging, provided you actually use the information to improve your approach.

There are three simple questions you can ask yourself to maximize the learning value of any experience and improve your effort in the future: What happened? Why did it happen? And how can I improve? (See Figure 4.1.)

What Happened? You need to be clear about the impact of your work if you are going to make it better moving forward. Too often, we answer this question too broadly (“I messed up”), rather than really understanding specifically what went well and what needs to be done more effectively. For example, if you're looking for a new job and not receiving offers, identify what's ineffective about your search process. Are you regularly called for in-person interviews after a phone screening? Are you called back for a second interview? Understanding what's not working helps you make informed decisions about how to focus your effort in ways that are most likely to improve your effectiveness. If your resume isn't getting attention, you probably need to change it or network more strategically. If you're getting initial interviews but not getting called back, your resume is probably fine, but you might need to improve your interviewing skills.

Why Did It Happen? When you understand your current outcomes, you have to consider why you received them. Answering this

question is a critical step. For example, if your recommendation for a product idea isn't accepted, knowing why enables you to be more effective the next time you have an idea to propose. Should you have done a better job of presenting the benefits of the idea? Were there negative consequences for some of the stakeholders that you hadn't anticipated? Did others fail to support you because you hadn't given them enough time to consider your suggestion?

How Can I Improve? Answering the “why” question paves the way for answering the next question: How can I improve? This answer is the foundation of a strategy for improvement. It will direct your attention toward the steps you need to take. It will lead you to take advantage of your strengths rather than focusing on your weaknesses. It will draw you to resources that you can rely on. Best of all, it allows you to have some degree of certainty that your changed approach will be more successful.

These three questions—What happened? Why did it happen? How can I improve?—focus your attention on the feedback provided by the experience. They facilitate a thought process that builds confidence and zeroes in on the effort that will accelerate growth and development.

Explaining your failure in terms of your effort puts you in control. You can work differently; you can apply what you learned. You can work to improve a faulty process. You can influence the support of others. Explaining your failure in terms of your approach—the nature of your effort reinforces the belief that you have the ability to create a different outcome in the future.

Faulty Self-Talk About Effort

A word of caution: Some explanations people give themselves appear on the surface to focus on the nature of their effort, but in reality these reasons are disguised judgments about their lack of ability. Sometimes when individuals say, “I should have done better” or “I should have put in

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more effort” what they really mean is that if they were more capable, they wouldn’t have made this particular mistake or they wouldn’t have to work so hard. Telling yourself you failed or had difficulty because you didn’t use the right approach is different from judging yourself. Be analytical and curious about what you can do differently after a failure, but don’t beat yourself up. The need to work hard at something is not a reflection of your potential; it’s information about your current level of development. You might be at a different stage of development from someone else, but remember, any challenging endeavor requires significant effort in order to learn to be proficient.

Learn to tell yourself that failure or difficulty is simply feedback about how to improve your effort and get better results—and believe it.

A Network of Support

The second factor that’s critical for building confidence is the support of those around you. In times of challenge and self-doubt, it’s hard to be completely self-sustaining or objective; we all need a network of people who feed our confidence. Although few individuals would dispute the advice to surround themselves with people who support their growth and development, many of us don’t actually do it—at least not to the degree we could. How often do we hang out with friends and complain about our bosses or companies? How often do we reinforce one another’s feelings that we’ve been treated unfairly or denied opportunities we deserve?

I’m not saying you shouldn’t have a few close friends with whom you can blow off steam, but if listening to you vent is all your friends and colleagues do, you’re missing something important. You need a support network that focuses on problem resolution, provides direct and constructive feedback, and gives you access to a wide variety of

perspectives and resources. This is the kind of network that can help you build confidence and gain a sense of control over your career.

Problem Resolution

A genuine network of support is one that stretches you and builds your belief that you can improve and accomplish your goals. It includes individuals who help you focus on what you can do to overcome the inevitable challenges of maintaining a meaningful career. A genuine support network doesn't only offer empathy for your frustrations; it also helps solve problems. One of the most effective support networks I've been blessed with during my career was a group of professionals I met in the Efficacy seminar I attended thirty years ago. We all listened to one another and were actively supportive, but when one of us had a challenge, the question most often asked was, "So what are you going to do differently?" We never allowed someone to get stuck in blaming external forces. We emphasized personal responsibility as our standard approach to the issues we faced.

Find the people who believe in you and can help you build your belief in yourself. Connect with those who will listen to your anger or frustration or confusion without judgment and then push you to be intentional about taking steps to improve your situation. People who support you to meet and overcome a challenge will build your confidence much more quickly than folks who offer sympathy but no support for action.

Direct and Constructive Feedback Friends and colleagues who tell you the truth about an area that needs development are as important to your growth as the individuals who buoy you up in tough times. Real feedback is the best gift you can receive. Seek it out on a regular basis so that you truly understand what you can do to expand your effectiveness.

I often hear professionals complain that they don't receive good feedback from others. I admit that not enough managers—or colleagues—are skilled in conveying information that helps individuals learn and grow. However, I've also observed that many

professionals say they want feedback, but their actions send a different message. Think about your approach. Do you look for specifics about what you could have done better or do you just want to hear “good job”? Are you willing to listen to a perspective that might be different from your own? Do you actually change your behavior based on the feedback you receive? If you can say yes to these questions, it’s likely you will receive feedback that helps you grow and become more confident as you see yourself get better and stronger.

At one point in my career, I was consistently receiving good performance reviews, and from what I could tell, I was on track for a promotion to a management-level position. However, when I was passed over for an opportunity I had assumed would be mine, I decided to find out what I could do to accelerate my advancement. At first my manager, Cathy, told me not to worry; I just needed a little more “seasoning.” I remember thinking I could leave it at that or I could push her to give me the real story. So I asked her, in as open and nondefensive a way as I could muster, to be direct with me about anything that would make a difference. I could see her trying to decide whether I could take the feedback. She took a risk and gave me insight into some of the subtle things I was doing that made senior staff question my readiness. Some of it was about my style of communication; some of it was about my dress. None of the feedback related to the formal requirements of the job; it all pertained to the unwritten rules of the organization’s culture. She took a chance and gave me the scoop on how I was perceived because of my openness to hearing it. With that information, I was able to be much more effective in helping my own cause—and she became an even bigger supporter because she knew I would act on what she told me.

It’s tough for many managers to give this kind of feedback; it’s often tougher when the manager and employee don’t share a background that provides a base of comfort and trust. However, when you send a strong message that you want direct feedback, and when you’re willing to make the person providing the feedback feel safe giving it to you, you make yourself “feedback worthy.” In return, you’re likely to get invaluable information that will accelerate your growth.

Ask for Support The kinds of support required throughout one's career are numerous. For example, you are likely to need information, access to influencers, new opportunities, budget and people resources, or support for a new idea. Knowing how to secure the counsel and resources you need builds confidence that you can engineer your desired outcomes. We'll talk more about how you do this in Chapter 7, but the first step in receiving the support you require is asking for it. That probably seems pretty straightforward, but how often do you struggle with a problem when there's probably someone who would be glad to coach you? How often are you afraid to ask for a resource or a different kind of assignment? People can't give support if they don't know what you need.

To get support, you also have to give it. When someone needs your help or effort, are you willing to do that extra bit? Do others see you as someone they can rely on? Do you positively affect the tone and productivity of your work group? If you present yourself as someone committed to helping the organization succeed, and as someone who will positively influence the productivity of others, you have something to offer that will make most managers and colleagues willing to offer their support in return.

Protect Your Confidence

Some people and situations are more likely to test your confidence than others. It's doubtful that you can avoid those individuals or situations entirely. What you can do, however, is minimize their capacity to undermine your confidence and your effort. Anticipate situations that are likely to erode your confidence and develop a strategy to stay focused on your belief in yourself and your ability to work effectively. If you have a manager or colleague whose style undermines your confidence, seek out someone who can coach you about how to develop a more productive relationship. If you have specific kinds of responsibilities that cause you anxiety, you might need to develop strategies to focus yourself and reduce your stress level. Some people I know write down all the things they do well when their confidence is feeling shaky. Others go for a run. Still others write about their feelings in a diary.

If you know you're headed into a particularly tough assignment, arrange for support ahead of time. Who can help you prepare? How will you recharge and reenergize so you can work effectively? I also recommend that after a demanding project, you debrief with someone who will be balanced in reinforcing your strengths and in giving you specific strategies for improving. Each of us is likely to have different approaches that ground us in our most confident and competent selves. Figure out what works for you and be deliberate in protecting your confidence.

Confidence is a fragile thing. And it isn't something you automatically have. Confidence is something you build over time and strategically nurture, especially during times when it is likely to be tried. Be intentional about cultivating the confidence that you need to accomplish what's important to you. The more confident you are, the bigger your reach will be. You will dare to have a broader vision, you will set more challenging goals, and you will create more choice for yourself. You will, in short, be a more developed person.

The Power of Choice

Adopt Key Ideas

- Attribute your successes to your ability and effort so that each success boosts your confidence.
- Explain your failures in terms of ineffective effort—not lack of ability.
- This leaves your confidence intact and stimulates more intensive effort.
- Failure is not an indication of your worth; it is feedback about how to get better.
- Build confidence by creating a support network that focuses on problem solving, provides direct and constructive feedback, and gives you access to a broad range of perspectives and resources.

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Begin Now

Replace your confidence-eroding self-talk with a dialogue that reinforces your belief in your capability to grow and develop over time.

Think of an area where you tend to cite lack of ability or forces outside your control as reasons for your difficulties.

Confidence-Eroding Self-Talk	Confidence-Building Self-Talk
Example: I'll never be good at networking. I'm not an outgoing person.	I'm most comfortable talking to people one to one; I need to initiate individual conversations with a greater range of colleagues.

When you find yourself explaining your difficulties with the self-talk in the left-hand column, consciously reframe the dialogue so as to build your confidence that you can engineer a more desirable outcome.

5

Make Your Effort Effective

HAVING CONFIDENCE IS critically important to your development, but it alone is not enough to enable your long-term growth. Confidence has to lead to effective effort because effective effort is what expands your skills and capabilities and drives your career. Effective effort gets results or moves you closer to your desired outcomes.

One of the most common mistakes professionals make is to confuse working hard with working effectively.

Germaine wants to be seen as the go-to person in her department. She works at least ten hours a day processing claims for a casualty insurance company. She's been doing the same for five years, and she's very good at what she does—to the point where she often redoes the work of others on her team in order to meet the expectations of her manager. Recently, her boss asked her to be part of a project team charged with evaluating a new software package, but she declined due to the demands of her workload.

Germaine is working hard, but she is not receiving the best return on her investment of time and energy. She's not learning new skills, she's not developing the skills of others, and she's not expanding the ways in which they contribute to their organizations.

I assure you that in her work group, there is someone who is putting in the same number of hours (or maybe even fewer) but who is getting better career traction because their effort is more effective.

If you're working hard but not accomplishing what's important to you, start by examining the nature of your effort. If you incorporate these steps into your career strategy, you're more likely to get the best return on the investment of your time and energy:

- Choose what you want as an outcome.
- Focus on what you can control.
- Expand your skills incrementally.
- Align your goals with the organization's needs.

Choose What You Want as an Outcome

Effective effort starts with the end in mind. What do you want to accomplish—in the short and the long term? It's hard to be strategic about shaping your career and garnering the support of others if you don't know the outcomes you're trying to achieve. What do you want to complete by the end of the day or the end of the year? What do you want people thinking or doing at the end of a meeting? The more precisely you can identify a goal, the more likely you will be able to figure out a strategy for accomplishing it.

This might seem obvious, but I'm struck by how often individuals are unclear about the outcomes they want. Imagine that you're driving and you don't know where you want to go. Without that orientation toward a final destination, it's easy to spend a lot of time going around in circles. It's also more likely you'll get distracted by the obstacles in your path. When you know your destination, however, you can choose some interesting detours, but you're still likely to make it to where you want to go. A clear vision keeps you focused on the effective effort that enables you to accomplish your goal.

When I started working on this book, I didn't have a dedicated time or consistent process for writing, and I wasn't making much progress. I finally realized that if I was going to get this book published, I had to structure my work life to support the effort. I also realized that I needed a team that could help me manage

the many aspects of editing and producing a book. Clarity about my desired outcome—publishing the book—helped direct my attention to what it would take to make it happen.

Just as it's important to know where you're headed short-term, it's also critical to identify what you want from your career long-term. What will give you satisfaction and a sense of achievement in the long run? You don't necessarily need to identify a particular position or type of job that you ultimately want, but you do need to give some thought to how you want to invest your time and energy. What makes you enjoy coming to work? What impact do you want to have? How would you like to honor your values in the work you do? If you pay attention to what engages you and what doesn't and then craft your work as best you can to align with those interests, you are much more likely to feel fulfilled in your career.

Some professionals are clear about their interests and career goals early on. However, for many of us, it takes some trial and error to determine where we're motivated to invest significant time and effort.

My own career journey is a good example. When I was growing up, I always said I wanted to be a doctor. But after my freshman year in college, I had to be honest with myself: I wasn't motivated to pursue the years of academic training that becoming a doctor required. Still, I wanted to make a good living, have the opportunity to use my people skills, and exert influence in an organization. Business seemed to be a field that would fulfill those aspirations, so I changed my major to cost accounting. After my junior year, I landed a summer internship in an accounting department and made more money than I imagined possible at this stage of my life. Despite the financial benefits, the experience showed me that accounting wasn't for me. I wanted a career that had more to do with people than with balance sheets.

It was now the beginning of my senior year, and I desperately needed to figure out my career direction. I solicited the help of a career counselor at my college. At her suggestion, I switched to human resources. Fortunately, I loved it! I had to stay an extra semester to complete the requirements, but my good grades were proof of my interest in the field.

I landed my first job in HR in the retail industry. My relationship skills were well utilized, but after some time, I realized I wasn't fulfilling my salary goals or those I had for strategic influence. To generate more income and to work in a position with profit-and-loss responsibility, I took on a role as a store manager. The switch into the operations area of the business led to several more promotions and prepared me to eventually become an officer in the company.

Measured in terms of influence and money, I had done a good job of accomplishing my vision, but I wasn't fulfilled. When I asked myself why, I realized that over the course of my career, I had come to truly value helping others develop, and I wanted to work in an industry where people were the central part of the mission. Going to work for the company that is now Korn Ferry was a way to bring all the threads together. I could do what I had learned I liked best—coach and mentor, build business relationships, negotiate deals, steer the outcomes of a team—and make enough money to support my family while doing it.

By continuing to ask myself, “What do I want as an outcome?” I was able to navigate through the twists and turns of my career in a way that kept me coming back to the things that were most important to me. Keeping my vision in front of me also helped me decline opportunities that weren't in line with what I wanted long-term.

What pattern do you see in your own life? Look carefully at how you choose to spend your time. What work is most satisfying and energizing? You get a big payoff when you invest effort in something you care about. You come to work gladly. You're naturally drawn to improving. And you are willing to work through the problems that arise. Knowing what's important to you provides clarity when you have to make critical decisions about which opportunities you will pursue and which you will forgo.

Regardless of the outcomes you choose, you also have to be willing to accept the consequences of your choices as there are likely to be some trade-offs. If you choose a high-powered career that requires extensive travel, you are likely to miss out on some family milestones. If you choose to work independently, you're likely to miss out on some level of collegial support. If you choose to invest the majority of your discretionary energy in your personal life rather than your

career, there is likely to be an impact on your perceived value to your organization.

I'm not suggesting you fear the consequences or avoid pursuing the outcomes that are important to you. Rather, I'm proposing that you take the time to identify what's most important to you—and consider what you could give up or forgo. Fully contemplate the likely consequences of your choices and then accept or actively manage them rather than be surprised by or resentful of them. Being clear about your desired outcomes and the consequences increases the likelihood that the investment of your effort will give you a return that you value.

Focus on What You Can Control

Effective effort is focused on what you can control. Remember, a key principle of the Power of Choice is this: It's not the stimulus, it's the response. You can't change the personality of your boss, but you can choose how the two of you interact. You can't keep the economy from taking a nose dive, but you can control how you respond to the challenges of a tight business climate.

Focus your effort on outcomes that are challenging but, at the same time, realistic. In other words, don't settle for the status quo. Look for outcomes that require you to stretch yourself. Try to improve a situation or learn something new, but concentrate on short-term goals that you have a reasonable likelihood of accomplishing. It's difficult to work effectively if you're fixated on achieving something that's currently unrealistic. If the gap between your current skill level and the demands of a situation is too great, you'll be frustrated, and it won't provide you with the feedback you need to improve. It's better to direct your energy toward goals that stretch you and build upon the foundation you have in place.

A colleague once recounted the approach she took in her first college economics course. It impressed me as a good example of paying attention to feedback and focusing on what you can control in order to accelerate your development. The course textbook was dense; the lecturer was dry. She eked by with a C on her first test. She tried to spend more hours studying but was frustrated and

overwhelmed by the content. Finally, she said to herself, “There’s got to be something I can do to get a better grade.” She went to the local library and ended up in the children’s section reading books about how the financial system works. Those books introduced her to the basics of economics. Once she was more grounded in the topic, she found the college textbook more understandable, and she was able to take better advantage of her study group’s support. She ended the term with a B+. Her willingness to accept her initial level of development in the subject and read children’s books to bring herself up to speed always impressed me. She took control of her situation to engineer better results.

When you’re feeling overwhelmed or out of control, break down your goals into more manageable chunks. Seek support and coaching. Consider whether another approach might be more effective. Remember, effective effort either accomplishes your desired outcomes or moves you closer to your goal. If you’re not getting the results you want, you need to face that fact. Don’t blame others; don’t give up. Focus on the steps you can take to achieve at least a small success. What can you control or influence? Even a small accomplishment creates momentum that moves you toward your ultimate vision.

Expand Your Skills Incrementally

When I advise you to focus on the things you can control, I’m not suggesting that you limit your goals. Quite the contrary. Dream big; have a grand vision for yourself. Dare to imagine that you can accomplish great things.

However, you have to work toward your vision incrementally. Development is a process of continuously stretching yourself. Start with what’s possible and important to accomplish today. When you reach your first goal, take on a little more challenge. When you’re successful at this next level, stretch a bit more. Over time, after a series of successes and probably some setbacks, a goal that was once unrealistic becomes attainable. Through an incremental process of development, you expand the scope of what’s possible.

I often have conversations with sales professionals inside and outside our company about “unrealistic” annual sales goals. I always challenge these individuals to begin by focusing their effort on a quarterly sales number they think is a reasonable stretch—regardless of the ultimate target. When their attention is on a goal that feels possible rather than on one that they fear is impossible, they typically reach the realistic but still challenging goal they set for themselves. This initial good result helps them learn which sales approaches are effective and which aren’t so that they can build their expertise and increase their confidence.

Then I encourage them to stretch a bit more: what additional revenue might be possible? More often than not, by pursuing their sales targets in incremental stages, they meet the original “unrealistic” goal. And if they don’t, we both have more accurate information to set a challenging but realistic target for the following year.

Sometimes individuals limit their development because they are afraid to take risks outside the bounds of what they are sure they can accomplish. It can appear “safe” to limit yourself to areas where you’ve had a history of success and avoid stretching yourself to develop new expertise, but playing it safe is actually a pretty risky strategy. Job requirements change. The competitive environment changes. The company’s expectations of you change. If you don’t stretch your capabilities over time, you minimize your options. Proactively pursuing incremental learning and development gives you opportunities; it expands your circle of control.

That said, sometimes people jump too far too fast. There’s no great harm in overstretching. In fact, if you don’t overreach from time to time, it’s probably a sign you’re playing it too safe. The harm comes if you don’t adjust your approach when you get the feedback that your strategy is unrealistic, given your current skill set or the demands of the external circumstances.

The diversity officer for a global company called us in recently to help her with her strategy. It was her first year on the job, and she had come to it full of ambition and great ideas. She had planned to host a global conference, start an aggressive recruiting strategy to boost the number of women worldwide in the company, and establish mentoring teams to support these women’s development.

Now, six months later, she was totally burned out from working nights and weekends, and she was angry with her boss for not giving her more support.

As we talked about her budget and staff resources, I learned that she had only a part-time assistant and a budget of \$40,000. No wonder she was exasperated! Her vision was a wonderful one, but it was unrealistic given the current size of her budget and staff and the amount of executive support. Together we crafted a plan that was more incremental. This year she would host a U.S.-based conference, not a global one. She would focus on networking with the heads of business units to build their understanding of the connections between diversity and inclusion and the organization's goals. She would work on creating a more effective working relationship with her manager. When the diversity officer focused on plans she felt she could accomplish, she felt much less frustrated and burned out. In addition, these challenging but realistic goals gave her a better chance of getting buy-in for a bigger budget and more staff for the next fiscal year.

When you're confronted with expectations that seem unrealistic, focus on a challenging but realistic goal. As you experience success, stretch yourself and take on something more challenging. This incremental process of development will enable you to accomplish many goals that were originally unrealistic and out of your control.

Align Your Goals with Your Organization's Needs

When professionals are deciding how to invest their efforts, I find they often underestimate the importance of aligning their efforts with the needs of the organization. You can be talented and busy with many responsibilities, but if you don't pair your talents and work with the organization's needs, you are not likely to be rewarded for your effort—or given opportunities to develop further.

Start by aligning your efforts with the goals of your manager and others you support. What are the results your area is responsible for? How is this work important to the business? What makes your manager successful? You are much more likely to receive both

recognition for your value and opportunities to grow if the people you work with most closely see you as someone they can rely on to accomplish what's important to them and to the organization.

The organization also expects you to make connections with others that enable you to get things done efficiently. Do you know whom to go to for information and support? Have you established connections such that others are willing to work collaboratively with you?

Once you've learned to do your job well and use the available resources effectively, your organization looks to you to influence others' work. Because you have developed deep technical expertise, your organization rightly expects you to coach and mentor team members and junior employees, either as a colleague or a manager. Now you are not only expected to contribute the value of your own work but also to magnify your contribution through your impact on others or by improving work processes and outcomes. This is where Germaine was falling short. She was doing excellent work herself but she wasn't delivering higher-order results by expanding her impact on the work of those around her.

I Don't Have Time to Do More

Very often aspiring leaders worry about the commitment required to expand their contributions. They mistakenly think that continued career momentum requires more work, rather than different ways of working. They continue to expect to be the expert, involved in every meeting and decision rather than using their expertise to develop a talented team who can take on more responsibilities. To continue your career momentum, you may have to spend less time in the very tasks that got you noticed in the first place so that you can make time to engage in higher-level, strategic activities.

I also find that in most organizations there's more room for negotiation and flexibility in how and when you spend your time than you might assume, if you have already established yourself as a valuable contributor and you position your needs in terms of benefits to the organization. Be willing to test the limits of the organization's culture to accommodate your unique talents, interests, and values. Is it really

required to work from “eight to faint” to get ahead? Is there more room for different points of view than might be apparent on the surface? Professionals are often surprised by the latitude they have when they are willing to invest in creating an honest partnership with the organization and the individuals they work with every day.

A young professional consulted with me about his demanding travel schedule. Although he loved his job, he worked for a consulting company where being at the client site during the work week was common practice. As a dad, this level of travel was taxing on him and his family. Given his long-standing relationship with the client, I encouraged him to negotiate with them about when they most needed him on site. With his client’s backing, they were able to agree on times when his presence was critical and when virtual access would be acceptable. He was able to reduce his travel time by 50 percent.

This individual’s approach was effective because he showed his willingness to align the needs of his client (and by extension the goals of his own organization for quality service) with his own interests. Such an approach might not always work out perfectly, and it certainly won’t fall into your lap. However, the more you can align your interests with the needs of the organization, the more likely you are to be highly engaged in and committed to your work—and to win your organization’s support.

The Highest Return on Investment of Your Time and Effort

However you define it, success requires you to choose how you will invest your effort. When you make these choices wisely, based on an understanding of your desired outcomes and the organization’s needs, you increase the impact of your effort. Know what you want as an outcome, focus on what you can control, expand your skills incrementally to move toward your vision, and align yourself with the organization’s needs. These four principles won’t guarantee success every time, but managing your career with them in mind creates momentum toward accomplishing your vision and maximizes your return on the investment of your effort.

The Power of Choice

Adopt Key Ideas

- The key indicator that your effort is effective is that it achieves your desired outcomes or it moves you closer to those goals.
- Choose what you want as an outcome—and accept the consequences of your choice.
- Focus on what you can control.
- Expand your skills incrementally to move toward your vision.
- Align yourself with the organization's needs.

Begin Now

Identify an area where you would like to devote more effective effort in order to reach a desired outcome.

- What outcome do you want from your effort?
- How does your desired outcome benefit your organization?
- What are you doing now that is moving you toward that outcome?
- What are you doing that is impeding your momentum? What do you need to do differently?
- What action steps will you take to make your effort more effective and move you closer to your goal?

6

Leverage Relational Skills

YOU CAN WORK HARD, but you won't be valued as an integral part of your organization unless leaders and colleagues know who you are and are comfortable working with you. Teamwork, client service, information sharing, problem solving—all these activities require individuals to interact with one another productively and with as little friction as possible. Given the importance of these interpersonal activities in today's workplaces, people who have developed relational skills, who have the social grace to navigate a broad spectrum of interactions and create comfortable and trusting relationships, are the most sought after by leaders and coworkers. It's only through exposure and connections that others know to call upon you for your expertise. It's only through relationships that you learn whose influence and support can help you to accomplish an objective. And most important, relational skills enable you to work with others for mutual gains.

The guidelines in this chapter will enable you to be more strategic and intentional in how you expand the breadth and depth of your relationships in order to expand your opportunities and deepen your impact.

Connect with Others

Relationships don't happen automatically. You have to put effort into making connections. How much effort do you currently expend on creating relationships? Do folks inside and outside your organization know who you are and what you have to offer? Do you have people you can rely on for support and advice? What is the quality of your relationships with coworkers you interact with every day? Would they say you're someone they can count on?

I'm amazed at how often professionals squander important opportunities to make connections with others. Recently, I gave a talk at a company-sponsored networking event for the African American Employee Resource Group. I directed my remarks toward the development of relational and influence skills, so I expected the group was well primed to take advantage of the meet-and-greet reception with their chief executive that followed my talk.

I was fascinated to watch what happened. The CEO who came expressly to network with this group started up a conversation with me. We stood in the middle of the room in a very accessible location, but none of the attendees came up to introduce themselves. Granted, the CEO could have reached out to the employees, but certainly anyone in this group could have walked up to him and initiated a conversation.

When we got back together for a Q&A, I asked the group why no one took advantage of the opportunity to meet the CEO. Some employees said that it felt awkward to interrupt; others commented that they wouldn't know what to say; still others weren't sure he would be interested in meeting them.

All those reservations are understandable, but letting their discomfort drive their actions meant they lost an invaluable opportunity—in fact, one that had been specifically set up for networking. How often do you forgo such important opportunities? How could you take better advantage of them to connect with people, and how would making these connections benefit your career?

For many professionals, initiating a conversation is the primary stumbling block. One of our consultants recently worked with a

young Asian manager at a top U.S. consulting firm. The manager was a quiet, unassuming guy who wanted to figure out a way to convey a lasting impression. As he and the consultant were working together, he mentioned that he spent his weekends racing motorcycles. The image of him in leathers wearing a full-face helmet and dragging his knee on the ground to make sharp turns certainly would help others remember him! When he added that he brought to his work the same passion for challenge and calculated risk-taking that made him an effective motorcycle racer, he had all the necessary pieces to create a great introduction for himself.

Think about what's interesting about you. In advance, prepare an introduction of yourself that conveys the essence of what you have to offer—your job, career interests, or personal attributes. Try to make it memorable. No matter their position in an organization, people want to meet interesting people. With a little up-front preparation to put your best foot forward, you can take advantage of these opportunities.

Shape Mutually Beneficial Relationships

A relationship, of course, is much more than being acquainted. It is an association that builds gradually when people spend time together and get to know one another. I often hear, "I could never have a relationship with someone like that." Certainly everyone wants to trust that others will work on their behalf, protect their interests, and will be predictable in their actions.

You have much more control over establishing the basis for good working relationships than you realize. You can't guarantee that people will support you in all instances. However, by following these four principles, you can shape your relationships in a manner that improves the odds of a mutually beneficial connection:

- Determine shared objectives.
- Clarify the advantages of cooperation.
- Take a risk on relationships.
- Build trust over time.

Let's take a closer look at each of these strategies.

Determine Shared Objectives

First, look for common ground that will serve as the basis for working together. What are leaders and colleagues responsible for accomplishing? What are their goals? Be genuinely interested in learning their story. Reserve judgment on the differences you encounter. Rather than focusing on reasons to avoid or distrust others, be curious and look for ways to connect.

Understand that common ground comes in many different forms. You don't have to share a person's working style, gender, or cultural identity to have something in common. However, you do need to understand the incentive each of you have to support one another. To unearth shared interests that can serve as a basis for partnership, you have to listen. You have to be genuinely interested in other people's points of view. If you see others only as obstacles to be managed or overcome, you are less likely to find a basis for mutual support or willing collaboration. Also, if you see others only as a tool for your own interests, they are likely to see through your manipulation.

Clarify the Advantages of Cooperation

The shared objectives might be clear to you, but sometimes you have to help others see what they can gain from working together. Paint a picture of the benefits for them.

Early in my career, a store manager named George was assigned to be the human resources manager—and my boss—at my Detroit store location. George considered this position to be a demotion, since he was being moved out of the suburban store he'd worked at previously. He was a white man with a gruff personality. He made disparaging remarks about the customers we served, and he was openly critical of staff, especially the intellectual capacity of Blacks, including me. My colleagues advised me that under George my career would be toast and to get out quickly. However, George had to sign off on any transfer or promotion I was offered—and I wasn't ready to let him drive me out of the company.

I decided that I would focus on finding ways within my job responsibilities to support George's priorities and make him look good within the company. I let him know that I was working to boost our customer service scores and reduce our inventory shortage. These improvements gave our store—and George—lots of positive visibility. As he came to understand how I could benefit him, his negative energy toward me began to lessen, and we were able to develop a useful and productive working relationship.

I never came to like the man. However, by focusing on our shared objectives, I gained the chance to move on to a bigger role with more responsibility at another store.

Given my objectives, I initially ignored some of his rude behavior and condescending comments about me and my colleagues. As we got to know each other better, we established a relationship where I could call him on the behavior I found most offensive. I never would have had this leverage with him if I hadn't invested in the relationship.

Some would call this manipulative; others might say I sold out. Each of us has to choose where we draw the line of integrity. From my point of view, I wasn't damaging George or myself in any way (the ethical line for me). I was focusing on our shared objectives so that I could maintain momentum in accomplishing what was important to me rather than let someone else dictate my future.

Take a Risk on Relationships

I believe most people are capable of—even prefer to have—honest, fair, and reciprocal relationships. The suspicion that “those people”—whether they're white guys or senior managers or staff from another department—can't become good working partners gets in the way of seeking a way to have mutually supportive relationships. If you are willing to step out of your comfort zone to build trust and show you can be depended on to support their interests, it increases the likelihood that the other party will do so as well.

Sharing information about oneself can be uncomfortable for people who feel different from the majority of those in their work group. If you are concerned about how you will be judged and

awarded opportunities in the organization, seeking a relationship can seem like a big leap of faith. Or our cultural norms might have taught us to be suspicious of others outside our trusted circle of family and friends; we might have learned that it's inappropriate to voice personal opinions to others, especially those in authority.

A colleague recently facilitated a dialogue between a group of white and Black women. After some significant time spent building openness and trust among members of the group, the conversation turned to cultural patterns the women observed about their Black or white colleagues. The white women commented that the Black women were standoffish and closed. The Black women thought the white women were too nosy. Clearly, there were different cultural rules at play that influenced how much disclosure was important for building a meaningful relationship. Neither group is right or wrong in their preferred style. However, the judgments about the other group were getting in the way of finding common ground to build a connection.

Those of us from backgrounds that are different from the majority of our coworkers have to step out of our comfort zones in order to increase the quality of our relationships. The deepest connections tend to form when we share our authentic selves, including our interests, opinions, and vulnerabilities.

Build Trust over Time

Trust comes from a series of successes in a working relationship. Few people would bet their most important goal on the sole support of someone with whom they haven't yet developed a good working relationship. Start small and risk more in the relationship as each of you learns what's important to the other and how you can work together most effectively.

I recently met Eduardo, a young Mexican American. He grew up in Texas in a tight-knit community and had deep connections to his extended family and friends. After three years as a production manager, he was offered a transfer and promotion to a facility in Ohio. Six months into the new job, he has found coworkers to be polite but reserved. He feels that his team doesn't really trust him. He's

painfully aware that his family is the only Hispanic one in his neighborhood, and one of only a few at the local school. Eduardo misses Texas and his old job. He wonders whether he's made a mistake.

When you're adjusting to the demands of a new job and working with colleagues who have backgrounds different from your own, it can be especially difficult to reach out to them. As we talked, Eduardo admitted that he's been focused on the operational aspects of his new job and not on getting to know people. His own discomfort with the new community, both at work and at home, had caused him to pull back from interacting with others. To turn the situation around, he has to realize he can't wait for coworkers to reach out to him; he has to take the initiative. He also has to acknowledge it's a process that takes time. The shared ties of community and family jump-started his relationships when he was in Texas. In his new community, there won't instantly be the same level of connection, but he has to make the effort and start somewhere.

How Eduardo might begin really depends on his style. He could dedicate a half hour every morning to walking around the plant and checking in with folks—personally and professionally. Or he could eat lunch with different groups every day. He could also schedule some after-work social gatherings.

The more he reaches out, the more he will learn about his coworkers and their interests, and the more they will learn about him.

When you become proactive about building other people's comfort with you, you are much more likely to find common ground that will serve as the basis for strong relationships regardless of differences in your cultures or backgrounds.

Be Strategic in Building Personal Connections

Building relationships is about securing the connections that grow your social capital—your ability to exchange knowledge, guide the flow of information, secure resources, and in general tap into a reserve of cooperation, problem solving, and creativity. Nurturing these valuable connections requires time and energy. Being strategic in your approach maximizes the impact of your relationship-building efforts.

The Characteristics of an Effective Network

As you plan how you will connect with others, consider the four characteristics of an effective network:

- *Breadth.* Do you have connections at many levels, inside and outside your organization? Can you rely on support from your peers, your leaders, and those more junior to you? Also consider whether your network gives you access to a wide variety of perspectives and experience. If everyone in your network shares your background, socioeconomic status, and politics, you're likely to be missing valuable input. Do you eat lunch with the same folks every day? Do you socialize only with individuals like yourself? Do you involve yourself in outside activities attended by the same kinds of people you work with? If the answer is yes, strongly consider expanding the breadth of your network.
- *Quality.* Too often, we stop at the number of our connections when we think of networking. However, when you're focused on relationships, not just networking, you'll also want to evaluate the quality of your connections. Have you spent enough time together so that there's a true understanding of one another's value? Is there mutual respect? Are the professionals you're connected with able and willing to use their influence or offer support on your behalf? No matter how many people you know, if the quality of the relationships isn't strong enough that they will work on your behalf, it doesn't matter how big your contact list is.
- *Reciprocity.* The quality of your network is often linked to the reciprocal nature of your connections. A primary purpose of making connections is to learn about others and figure out the resources and support you might have to offer each other. Some might want the satisfaction of watching young talent grow or the support to sell an idea. Others might need your resources, your advice, your effort, or your access to someone else. You can be a role model, a sounding board, an advocate, or a coach.

If you find yourself hesitant to make connections, consider the value of what you have to offer. Professionals who know their

value are more likely to reach out. Why should people get to know you? What strengths do you bring? Being clear about your value makes it easier to be a giver, not just a receiver; owning your value gives you capital for building a meaningful network of connections.

- *Dynamic.* Your relationships will change over time. Your career priorities and development needs will change. You will have to add to your network or invest differently in some relationships over the course of your career. For example, early on you need to establish a broad network of connections inside your organization so that you learn how to get things done in the context of your responsibilities. As your career progresses, you typically need broader outside connections to stay current with the trends in your industry and relevant to the evolving needs of your clients or customers.

Too many women and members of underrepresented groups don't expand their networks sufficiently as they move up in their organizations. One reason is that the time spent cultivating new relationships, such as with other executives and external industry leaders, leaves less time for some of the important career connections made during earlier years. Some professionals feel guilty for leaving those connections behind. Others are pressured by members of their network to avoid establishing new relationships, since they might be accused of "becoming one of them." I'm not advocating that you ignore those individuals who supported your early successes, but at the same time, you can't be limited to those connections. You and your relationships need to change over time. The wider and stronger your network, the better poised you are to be a resource for others, including those connections you made earlier in your career.

Develop a Connection with Your Manager

Just as I had to find a way to work with George, you must always develop a relationship with your manager. It doesn't matter if he or she is remote, uninvolved, harsh, abrupt, or incompetent. Your

manager is typically the person who has the most influence on the opportunities you receive, so you'll get better support and be able to create more options for yourself if you maintain a good relationship.

Your manager needs to trust that you are an individual who will represent him or her well through the quality of your work and through your presentation of the team to others. No manager wants to feel that someone on the team doesn't really care about the work or, even worse, is working at cross purposes.

If you don't know what's important to your manager, ask. Most managers are glad to discuss their goals for the group. They might even be willing to share where they'd like to go in their careers. Any manager will be heartened to hear you're on board with his or her objectives.

If you don't understand your manager's work style, ask how he or she wants to interact with you and what he or she needs to work effectively with you. For example, is your manager a person who loves to talk through all the angles of a problem or someone who wants only the bottom line? Does he or she want to know the details of your projects or only the problems you are experiencing? The better you understand your manager's expectations of you in terms of deliverables and working style, the better you'll be able to shape an effective working relationship.

Professional Relationships Are Not Friendships

You can choose which relationships you invest in and which ones you don't, but understand that for the sake of your goals, you will sometimes have to invest in relationships you don't particularly enjoy or that you initially find uncomfortable. Trusting professional relationships might evolve into friendships, but friendship is not a requirement. Rather, professional relationships are about connecting with someone to accomplish mutually important outcomes. You might not like someone else's style or how they choose to spend their time outside of work. They might not particularly like you. However, such factors are not sufficient to write off the possibility of establishing a productive relationship. If you start by assuming the other person is too irritating, too untrustworthy, or

too closed-minded ever to have a relationship with, you will never figure out a way to work together. In fact, you're not likely to put much effort into the relationship at all.

Avoid “Connection Compromisers”

Your appearance and presence are an advertisement for why others should connect with you. Like in any branding campaign, your “packaging” often leads people to quickly decide whether or not they're interested in you. While I fully embrace the idea of being comfortable with who you are, it's important not to confuse a certain style, dress, or appearance with the essence of who you are. Not long ago, a colleague of mine attended a one-man show about R. Buckminster Fuller, a rather eccentric twentieth-century genius most famous for the geodesic dome. He was years ahead of his time in his advocacy for green living. In the show, Fuller explained that in his earlier years, he was committed to wearing comfortable clothes wherever he went—even at events that typically called for a suit and a tie. As you would expect, he got a lot of notice for his failure to conform to the social norms of the time. What he didn't get was funding for his novel ideas. Finally, Fuller said, “I decided to dress like a banker so that people could see me and my inventions, and not my eccentricities.”

I was struck by his insight. Fuller might have felt more comfortable in khakis and sneakers; he might have thought formal dress requirements were ostentatious. He also had the wisdom to see that, at the time, his dress wasn't getting him the outcomes he wanted. In fact, it was distracting people from who he was and what he had to offer.

I encourage each of you to look at yourself with the same honesty. Are there things about the way you dress or present yourself that make it harder for others to connect with you? Does your presence suggest the strengths you bring to the table? The more approachable and appealing you make your “package,” the more likely people will take the time to get to know you. This applies to your clothes and the jewelry you wear—even the way you talk. Be sensitive to the norms in your environment. If your workplace is buttoned down and conservative, it's not the place for urban chic. There's a lot of truth

in the adage “Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” No matter how successful your efforts at the gym, dress in a manner that calls attention to your brains, not your body. If your language patterns are different from the people’s whose positions you aspire to, consider adapting your grammar and vocabulary to reflect theirs.

I understand that dress, style of interaction, and language are controversial for many of us who are from different cultures. They become dividing lines between how much we conform to our work culture and how much we maintain our unique heritage and personal culture. Those are personal decisions. However, I encourage you to consider the outcomes you want and whether your decisions contribute to those outcomes.

If you choose to keep a style that’s different from your organization’s culture, then take personal responsibility for your decision; don’t hide behind the intolerance of others. Own the fact that you must make the extra effort to build others’ comfort with your choices and ensure that they don’t make snap judgments based on your outward appearance or style. Some of you, like Buckminster Fuller, will choose to conform to the norms of your business environment; others won’t. The choice is yours, but don’t blame others for the consequences of your choice.

Relational Confidence Draws Others to You

Relationship building is a learned skill like any other skill. The more you practice, the better you become. You expand the range of personalities and perspectives that you can interact with gracefully. Your connections don’t have to be limited to people like you. Rather, you build your confidence that you have something to offer in any relationship.

Confidence in relating to others sends a strong message. When I first started working on this book, I talked to many accomplished friends and colleagues about their own career journeys. Almost all of them could recount turning points in their careers that launched them on the trajectory to their current levels of success. I noticed that these pivotal moments were always more of an internal change rather than anything unique about the external circumstances.

Through a series of experiences—some positive, some more challenging—all of these individuals embraced who they were as people and what they had to offer. They realized they didn't have to be cookie-cutter versions of the people around them. They could connect to others from their unique heritage and perspective, but they didn't pigeonhole themselves—or let others pigeonhole them—based on their background. They were free to represent and expand the full scope of their talents and perspectives. When they were comfortable with themselves and confident in their ability to relate to others, they were able to create more options for themselves. They leveraged their relationships to expand their impact.

Such freedom and confidence in your relational skills don't come easily, but the effort to learn to interact productively and build meaningful relationships across the broad spectrum of individuals is worth the payoff.

The Power of Choice

Adopt Key Ideas

- Relational skills are as essential to your career success as the quality of your output. Building relationships is about securing the connections to grow your social capital; it is about your ability to exchange knowledge, guide the flow of information, and secure resources.
- Don't let discomfort drive your actions and cause you to miss an invaluable opportunity to make a connection. Become proactive and take the initiative in building relationships.
- Take the time to identify and internalize your value. Professionals who know their value are more likely to reach out and initiate connections.

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- Effectively relating to others isn't about whether you like them or they like you. It's about figuring out the resources and support you and they have and how to work together to accomplish an objective.
- Make sure your presence suggests the strengths you bring to the table.

The more approachable and appealing you make your package, the easier it is to establish connections.

Begin Now

Prepare yourself to reach out and initiate a connection. Remember, the whole purpose of making a connection is to learn about that person and build comfort and trust. The connection lays the foundation for working together toward a shared objective.

- Identify the person you will connect with.
- Consider what you bring to the relationship. How might this person benefit from a connection with you?
- Determine how you will contact this person (for example, making a phone call, asking someone for an introduction, or attending an event). Then decide when you will initiate the connection.
- Prepare your introduction. Make sure your introduction leaves this person with the essence of your job, career interests, or personal attributes.

7

Use Influence Skills to Shape Your Reality

THE ULTIMATE AIM of this book is to enable you to shape the reality that's important to you—to proactively and deliberately pursue your goals—rather than have your future determined by the desires and motives of others. Everything I've talked about so far—building confidence, being resilient in the face of temporary setbacks or low expectations, studying the results of your efforts so you can become more effective, clearly identifying your desired outcome, and developing strategic relationships—is critical to your ability to engineer the professional life you desire.

The art of influencing others is so important to managing your career and to expanding your value to your organization that it, too, deserves special focus. This chapter explores how you command trust and respect without provoking fear or resentment. It examines how you become masterful at achieving the outcomes that are important to you and the work you do.

Choose to Be Influential

Making a conscious decision to be more influential is the first step—and often the most difficult. (See Figure 7.1.) When you

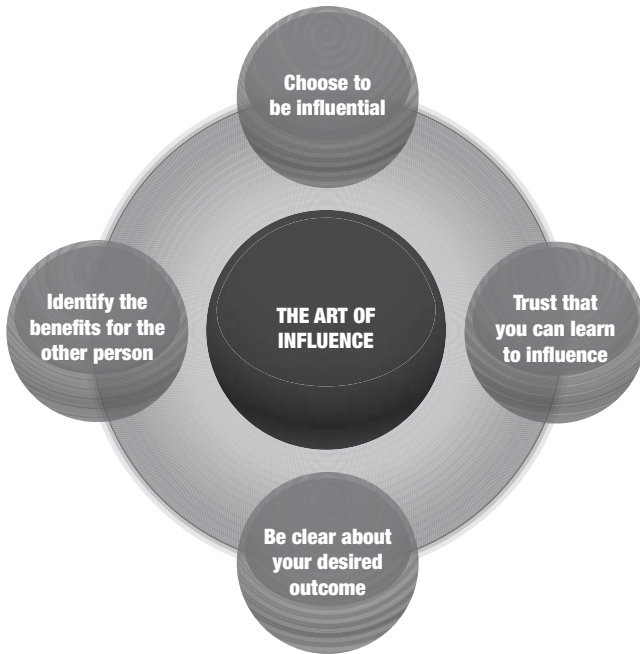


Figure 7.1

become someone who shapes the opinions and practices of others, people begin to pay attention to you. You can't hide in the crowd. Others expect you to have an opinion and a strategy for action. They are also more likely to give you pushback on your ideas.

If you've been comfortable working in the background or relying on the decisions of others, it can be uncomfortable to take more control and to accept the responsibility of leadership. It can be especially uncomfortable for individuals whose differences make them feel they have to work harder to fit in or prove themselves. Many of us were taught to "go along to get along." Some of us were socialized to believe that we shouldn't share our opinions with those in authority or that we shouldn't challenge the perspectives of our coworkers. Still others feel that they are being too direct or aggressive when they advocate for themselves or a point of view. Because of these varying cultural messages, many professionals from diverse

backgrounds often feel that it's less risky to let others set the tone and direction for important aspects of their work lives.

However, this perceived safety comes at a cost. If you don't offer opinions, people stop seeking them. If you don't take control of what happens to you, others decide for you. If you don't develop the skills to shape the commitment and effort of others, you become invisible to the movers and shakers within the organization. Over time, your career stagnates.

There are many ways to use influence skills effectively. Trust that there is an approach (or several approaches) that will fit your personality, your culture, and the needs of the situation. Some of you will learn to take bold stands in public settings; others will prefer to leverage opinions one-to-one in private conversations. Some of you will persuade through the power of writing; others will lead by example. Most likely, all of you will need to expand the repertoire you have now; you will have to step out of your comfort zones. To find the style of influence that works best for you, you must commit to building your capabilities in this area.

I'm reminded of four Asian women who attended an Efficacy program almost seven years ago. They were discouraged to realize that their strong cultural messages to avoid self-promotion were contributing to their feelings of being stuck and taken for granted in their current positions. At the same time, they had a hard time imagining themselves giving the elevator speeches they had developed and practiced in the program. So they made a pact to stay in touch and help one another find ways to take credit for their accomplishments and convey their value to their organization.

They encouraged one another to talk to their managers about their career goals, rather than waiting to be asked. They emboldened one another to reach out to other leaders to discuss their job function and what new responsibilities they'd be interested in. As they were offered new opportunities, they helped one another prepare for their interviews. Their hard work was very successful. By being intentional with their efforts to influence their careers, each of them has been promoted at least once; two of them have been promoted twice since they attended that program.

In addition to the cultural messages you might have received about trying to influence others, there are other factors in many work environments that discourage the pursuit of influential proficiency. Influence skills might be labeled as manipulative. People are accused of brownnosing or playing politics. Some use their influence to take advantage of others or to advance themselves at the expense of their colleagues. When you've witnessed or experienced such exploitation, it's understandable to be cautious about the use of power.

Influence built on manipulation and dishonesty has a shallow foundation—one that typically falls apart in the face of influence built from genuine alliances of mutual respect. True power and far-reaching influence make an individual and those around him or her stronger.

All organizations need influencers who can gain access to necessary resources or who can mobilize a group of people to get things done. There need to be leaders (formal or informal) who can facilitate a group's effort to solve problems and make a difference. It is only through developing influential proficiency that you have the power to better yourself and those around you.

As I said earlier, the first step in developing strong influence skills is deciding you want to be an influencer: you are willing to take the risk of the greater visibility and the greater expectations for leadership that come with the decision. Your payoff will be the increased control and freedom that comes from knowing how to engineer the outcomes you desire.

Influence Skills Require Practice and Effort

You have to decide you want to influence, and you have to trust that you can learn to influence. It has always struck me as odd that no one expects to immediately know how to program a computer or analyze a spreadsheet. Yet we often assume that some individuals are naturally persuasive and influential, that they are born leaders. Just as you can't learn how to play music without picking up an instrument, you have to put yourself in situations that require you to shape the opinions and behaviors of others. It takes trying different

strategies in order to discover which ones are most effective. Influence is like any other skill—perfecting it takes practice.

Some of us start practicing our influence skills at a very early age. I'm the oldest of five children. My siblings can attest that I regularly tried to persuade them to share my chores and their toys. As some of us get older, we use the skills we have developed to become high school class officers or leaders in campus organizations. If you are one of these folks, trust that you can transfer those skills to the influence demands of the workplace. If you aren't, it's never too late to learn.

Begin by studying how things happen in your organization, both formally and informally. How do effective influencers create a shared vision and commitment? How do they present their point of view in a way that invites collaboration and agreement? How do they handle differing points of view?

Then take an incremental approach. Share your opinions more regularly in conversations with your friends. Offer your point of view to your manager. Speak up in meetings. Or offer to lead a small project. You can't wait to be given a title or permission to be a person of influence. Every work situation has opportunities to suggest an improvement, voice your interests, or motivate others to act. Begin to take advantage of them.

Be willing to experiment with a variety of approaches. Some people need the facts and a good logical argument to be persuaded. Others need to identify with your vision. Still others are willing to go along in return for your support on something important to them. Learn from what's effective and what falls short. Ask for feedback and coaching from someone you trust to help refine your skills. Your willingness to stretch yourself and risk disagreement or rejection will teach you more about influencing than hiding yourself and your ideas. Your successes will give you confidence and increase your comfort in shaping the attitudes and actions of others—the essence of influence.

Identify Your Desired Outcome

As with any area of effective effort, you have to be clear about the outcome you want before you try to influence a situation. You have

to know the goal you're moving toward in order to gauge whether you're having an impact—and where you are willing to negotiate. Be open to the possibility that there are likely several ways to achieve your goal, not just the solution you have in mind. Be willing to back up or take some detours when you need to, but stay focused on your desired outcome.

Recently, an employee came to me asking to cut back on the projects she was responsible for. I didn't have other folks who could step in and take on some of her workload; we were all stretched thin. So as much as I wanted to be sympathetic, I wasn't too pleased with her request, and I'm sure I conveyed that. She revealed that a big source of tension was feeling immense pressure to respond immediately to the e-mails I send out at all hours of the day and night. (I travel a lot, so nights and weekends are my time for reaching out to internal folks.) She never felt like she could be "off" when she was working on projects with me.

With that understanding, we were able to work out a mutually agreeable solution. She would acknowledge my request within twenty-four hours and let me know when she would be able to complete it. We both went away satisfied with the outcome. I know she's working on what's important to me even if I don't get an immediate response, and she's more in control of when and how she works. Because she could identify that having more control over her schedule—not necessarily a reduction of her responsibilities—was most important to her, it was easier to find a mutually agreeable solution.

Identify the Benefits

Influence happens best in the context of a relationship. To earn support for your ideas and approaches, you have to show that you'll support the objectives of those you most want to influence. The best influencers don't concentrate on pushing their point of view. They concentrate on figuring out why someone might be willing to adopt their perspective or approach. They make those benefits clear to those they want to influence. They've learned that talking more or louder doesn't usually change people's minds. (If the influencer is

in a position of power, it might change behavior temporarily, but simply pushing an opinion more aggressively seldom results in a change of heart.)

Being a good influencer requires being a good observer and a good listener. What does the other person have to gain by adopting your approach? What are they concerned about? How can you protect their interests while advancing your own?

Our clients, like all customers, want to know that they are getting a good return on the investment they make in their business relationship with us. I learned a long time ago that when I clearly position our services as an answer to a client's problems—a way to increase productivity or reduce turnover costs, for example—the client is much less concerned about the cost. In order to make my solutions convincing, however, I have to really understand the source of the client's pain and offer an approach that provides relief. This is true in any influence situation: it has to be clear that the influencer has the interests of the other party at heart before that person is willing to collaborate or offer support.

All influencers encounter a lack of support from others at times. When this happens to you, understand that at its core, any resistance is seldom really about you. Rather, ask yourself if you have made the case for why your recommended approach or desired outcome is in the interest of whomever you're trying to influence. The person you're trying to influence is anticipating some cost—in time, money, inconvenience, or esteem, for example—that you haven't convinced them is worth paying. To be successful in your approach, you have to figure out the win for the other person.

Understand the Context of the Situation

Many influence situations are like icebergs: you can see some of the problem, but in most situations there's much more underneath the surface. Just as it was the ice underneath the surface that sank the Titanic, failing to consider the more hidden aspects of any negotiation or influence situation can derail your efforts.

Study the unwritten rules in your organization. How do effective influencers shape the willing collaboration of others? For instance,

in many organizations, the real decision-making is seldom done in group meetings. Opinions are shaped one conversation at a time well before the meeting where the official decision gets made. You can have the best proposal, but if you haven't built support for it ahead of time, it's unlikely to get accepted.

In any negotiation or influence situation, you also have to calculate what's possible. You have to understand the cost of the position you're taking. There are some situations where the cost of negotiation is high and being inflexible damages your credibility as an influencer. The most effective influencers learn to assess which situations are moderate risks and which are unrealistic (for now).

For instance, I was coaching an individual about setting better boundaries between his workload and his personal commitments. This was a person who believed he had to say yes to everything, so we were working on prioritizing those responsibilities that yielded the best return. He had identified client contact opportunities as his first priority. As a result, when he was asked to attend a high-profile internal training program open only to folks who were seen as having high potential, he asked the program coordinator for a rain check since the date conflicted with a big client conference he had been invited to attend as a participant. Unfortunately, he gave little explanation about why he declined the invitation. Although I applauded his efforts to be more strategic in how he spends his time, he failed to calculate the cost. The invitation to attend the internal training was seen as a real plum; declining it cost him a significant level of support from the manager who had proposed his nomination.

It might have been possible to negotiate another opportunity for the training; it certainly was possible to negotiate other opportunities for client interaction. But because this individual didn't fully calculate the cost of asking for a rain check, he didn't influence the situation in a way that was aligned with his best interests.

I've seen people champion a worthwhile cause—the organization's approach to inclusion, an improved work process, or a new product—and become frustrated, derailed, and dismissed because they expected change at a pace the organization wasn't ready to adopt. Then, instead of focusing on how to shape incremental

progress, they lost their credibility by being righteous about their expectations for change, rather than strategic in the steps ultimately required to prevail. The best influencers don't settle for the status quo; they always believe they can make a difference. But they also pay close attention to the signals about how to use their leverage and work at influencing change in stages.

Build Alliances with People Who Have Influence

As your span of influence expands, you can't personally influence every individual whose support makes a difference. You need to have connections with others who will help shape your desired outcomes.

Understand that these alliances need to extend in all directions within the organization. Often, people on the front line can just as quickly sabotage the effective implementation of a good idea as someone who is higher up. They might not be able to pull the plug on a budget, but they can certainly make costly mistakes or ignore the effort entirely. On the flip side, the ability to influence the discretionary efforts of those you rely on for executing critical projects expands your contribution to the organization exponentially. You are not only contributing your own efforts but also the efforts of those you influence.

In the previous chapter, we talked about networking—getting to know people and having them get to know you. Building an alliance is a higher-order relationship. It's when two people have worked together enough to understand their shared interests, and they agree to work on each other's behalf in order to accomplish an individual goal. Each side knows what they have to gain by collaborating and what they have to lose by conflict.

At one point in my career, the CEO of my company was adamant that we needed to accelerate the time frame in which our most promising talent became officers. He charged me with designing a process that would reduce the development time for an officer from the typical ten to fifteen years to five years. This was a task with many obstacles. There was understandable internal resistance to the notion that we would select a limited number of people for a targeted development experience. And there was skepticism that it was

possible to create an effective officer in only five years. I knew that if any accelerated track were going to be effective, it had to have the buy-in of the line leadership, or else those selected would not receive the internal support required to ensure they had the appropriate experience and business savvy.

Before I began planning how to structure the program, I had extensive conversations with the various officers. I learned about their interests so I could win their support. For some, it was simply understanding that this project was important to the CEO. Others saw it as a means of more aggressively growing our business. When I had the backing of enough leaders to establish the credibility of the effort, I proceeded with designing the details: how we would handle the selection process, which schools we would tap for an accelerated MBA experience, and the developmental rotations that would be critical.

Had I been given this assignment earlier in my career, I think I would have erroneously believed that because the CEO charged me with making this happen, I could go ahead and put a process in place. Fortunately, by the time I had to take on this project, I had learned the importance of building alliances. I knew I had to build support and credibility for the overall idea—and for the specifics of the implementation—so that the rising officers would be legitimately positioned for success.

Influence Is Not Asking for Permission

There is a subtle but very important distinction in the attitudes of the most effective influencers. Effective influencers believe they have the power and the right to advocate for what's important to them. They are appropriately respectful of authority, they are cognizant of the current limitations and challenges in any situation, and they understand the critical importance of others' buy-in. However, they don't ask for others' permission to pursue what's important to them. They give themselves permission—and then proceed to devise a strategy for gathering the resources and support necessary to accomplish their goals. Instead of thinking, "They won't let me,"

they think, “What do I need to do next?” This fundamental belief—I have the right and the capacity to shape my circumstances—causes a profound shift in the quality of one’s influence efforts. It places the power for change squarely with the individual rather than abdicating that power to others.

Own the power to be an effective influencer. Developing your influence skills is at the heart of achieving the professional career that’s important to you. If you don’t shape your own circumstances, someone else will. How to exert influence is a learnable skill. Whatever level of influence expertise you have now—whether it’s refined and far-reaching or still rudimentary—commit to expanding your ability to make things happen for yourself and for others. Every one of us has opportunities to practice and learn how to tap the willing support of others if we choose to be intentional about expanding our breadth and depth of influence.

The Power of Choice

Adopt Key Ideas

- Decide you want to become more influential. The payoff will be the increased control and freedom that comes from knowing how to engineer the outcomes that are important to you.
- Be clear about what you want as an outcome, and be open to the possibility that there are likely several ways to achieve your goal.
- Identify the benefits for the other person; why might he or she be willing to adopt your perspective or approach?
- Create change over time; assess which situations are moderate risks and which situations are unrealistic for now.
- Build alliances with other influencers so that you expand your power to accomplish shared goals.

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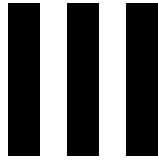
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Begin Now

Identify a situation where you feel your influence would benefit those involved. It should be one that will require you to stretch your influence skills but where you have confidence you can make a difference.

- Identify the outcome you want.
- Identify the benefits for those involved. Why should they adopt your perspective or approach?
- Think through how you will approach the situation. What actions or points of discussion on your part are likely to influence others?
- Discuss your approach with someone you trust, and ask for feedback.
- Study the outcome of your effort to understand your results. Remember to own the success of your effort and look for ways to improve your impact in the future.

PART



The Power of Choice in Action

THE POWER OF Choice principles offer a perspective for managing the many decisions you have to make—and the many obstacles you will encounter—in the course of managing a demanding and fulfilling career. More than a prescriptive set of actions, they serve as a compass that guides your response to circumstances and helps you create the environment you want to work in.

The scenarios in this part of the book are examples of real-life situations encountered by professionals who consider themselves, or are considered by others, to be different from the majority of their colleagues in some significant dimension. Some details have been altered to protect confidentiality, but you will recognize their dilemmas.

After each example, I ask several questions about what's happening in each scenario and what would be an effective response given the person's challenges. I encourage you to think about these questions before jumping ahead to my analysis and recommendations.

Doing so will build your Power of Choice “muscle” and help you to think critically about the best approach for your own circumstances.

In addition to offering a perspective on each example, I also comment on how you might more broadly apply the principles used in that particular situation. My comments aren’t intended to offer the definitive way to respond. The purpose is to help you anticipate and choose responses that will help you manage your career by design, not by default.

8

Real-World Choices

Choose to Overcome Low Expectations

UPON GRADUATING with her MBA, Shaniqua was hired by a prestigious investment firm and entered its one-year management-development program along with other newly hired MBAs. Her group consisted of ten people who would go through three fifteen-week rotations over the course of a year in order to gain exposure to key functions in the firm.

Shaniqua was a highly confident individual and a real go-getter from Washington, D.C. She had a big smile and an engaging personality.

During these rotations, partners generally reach out to help those in the program learn the culture of the company. Occasionally, a partner invites a member of the group out to lunch or offers additional coaching and informal feedback. Ryan, one of Shaniqua's cohorts, had this experience. A partner took Ryan under his wing, which seemed to give Ryan momentum. Shaniqua even heard the partner telling Ryan after he'd taken on a project that was a little over his head, "You remind me of me when I started with the firm."

Shaniqua's experience was a stark contrast to that. None of the partners reached out to her. In fact, Shaniqua felt that the

partners overlooked her or interacted with her only as needed. When assignments were distributed, it seemed to her that she always got the weakest or most boring projects. It was almost as if they didn't expect much from her. She got little coaching, and if she got any feedback at all from a partner, it was vague and conveyed in a somewhat negative tone: "Your written communication is not as clear as we need it to be. Try doing a rewrite. When you get bogged down, I have an open-door policy. So come see me, and I will do what I can to help you get you back on track."

By the end of the first rotation, Shaniqua was frustrated and angry about the firm. She complained to a friend, "Initially, I thought this would be a good place to start a career, but I've been having some real doubts about whether I can be successful here. It's unusual to see an African American in the firm, let alone an African American woman. This firm has a big push around recruiting diversity, but I don't think they're serious about giving folks like me a real chance to succeed."

Halfway through the second rotation, she missed a deadline on a project. Recounting the incident later, Shaniqua commented, "I was so embarrassed. That partner yelled at me in front of everyone at the project meeting. He insinuated that I was not his choice for his team, but that he was stuck with me because the management-development program made the assignment."

Shaniqua found herself avoiding colleagues on the project team who had witnessed the partner's tirade. She also skipped several of the Friday evening get-togethers with her cohorts from the management development program. She knew these were intended as opportunities to relax, blow off steam, and offer one another support, but Shaniqua complained to her family, "They keep asking me how I feel about my job. They ask me about my background, my social life—they keep trying to get into my business. I am annoyed at how nosy these people are."

Shaniqua finally shared with her family that she was considering quitting before the next rotation started: "I'm not cut out to be in an investment firm. Why would anyone want to work in such a boring industry anyway? I think I should shift to something completely different."

Reflection Questions

- In what ways were low expectations communicated to Shaniqua?
- What do you think triggered the low expectations?
- To what extent did Shaniqua accept and internalize those expectations?
- At what points in Shaniqua's story could she have responded differently to keep herself from going into a downward spiral?

Analysis and Recommendations

Shaniqua got caught in a downward spiral of low expectations. When she wasn't supported or challenged to expand her expertise, she began to withdraw. Her efforts to deliver strong outcomes were compromised. Since she wasn't as engaged as her colleagues, it's likely that her withdrawal reinforced the original low expectations. She also allowed her anger and disappointment to get in the way of using the support her colleagues could have offered.

It's understandably discouraging when others react to you because of your difference or some stereotyped assumption about you or your capabilities. Although I'm not justifying that behavior, Shaniqua should acknowledge that her differences might be an obstacle in establishing rapport and trust with the firm's partners. Then she needs to ask herself whether she'd rather be a victim of circumstances or look for ways to take control. If she wants to be treated like Ryan, she will need to be proactive to reduce the "noise" that her differences might cause. Even something as simple as, "Hello, I'm Shaniqua; don't be afraid to mispronounce my name" can go a long way in making a connection and establishing a level of comfort that will jump-start a relationship.

It's absolutely critical that Shaniqua stay engaged. Although she was understandably upset by her manager's public criticism of her, she needs to be proactive to figure out his expectations and shape his perception of her contributions. She might have asked for a meeting with him to better understand how she can deliver to the standards and to deepen his awareness of her expertise.

She could also have an honest conversation with a colleague or mentor about how she sees the situation and ask for advice on how

to interact more effectively. Blaming or judging others isn't likely to produce the outcome she wants. If she can be openly curious about how she might interact with others to receive the assignments and support she wants, she gives others insight into her goals and invites them to engage with her.

The Broader Application

Although it's certainly demoralizing when you have to confront low expectations or lack of support from others, keep your focus on what you can control. When you withdraw or put your energy into blaming others, you compromise your capacity to engineer the backing and opportunities necessary to advance your career.

Create Comfort and Build Trust Being able to effectively create comfort and build trust is a critical interpersonal skill set for anyone who may be perceived as different from the majority of the group. Too often, we assume we have no control over others' reactions to us; our energy is focused on the bias and insensitivity of others.

Start with the assumption that you have the power and the capacity to make meaningful connections with others. Accept the fact that it will take work to build connections. However, the alternative is to let your possibilities be limited by others' discomfort with you. Some professionals choose to conform to the people and organizations around them in order to accomplish what's important to them. Others maintain a very unique style. However, anyone who is influential is likely to be intentional in their efforts to relate well to others and to help others become familiar and comfortable with them.

It's Not the Stimulus, It's the Response All of us hit periods in our careers where we stumble or where we're pressed to prove our capabilities to others. The trick is to catch yourself when the challenges begin to result in a downward spiral. Take a step back and ask yourself what you can do to protect your confidence and move toward a better outcome.

Refuse to be a victim of the circumstances around you.

Reach out to people who believe in you and who will give you the support you need. Look for those who can provide perspectives and strategies that will help you get grounded again.

Then reshape your approach by employing effective effort. Remember that effective effort is characterized by being seriously committed and engaged, focused on receiving feedback, and strategic in using that feedback to learn and improve outcomes. When you deliver strong outcomes, you add value to the business. You build the “personal equity” that can move people beyond assumptions about you and focus attention on your expertise, not your differences.

Choose to Build Supportive Relationships

After only eighteen months with the company, Ricardo stood out as a motivated self-starter with a good eye for detail. Managers and colleagues liked the fact that he could take something and run with it on his own from start to finish. His technical expertise positioned him to join a high-profile process-implementation group, long known for its strong teamwork. Joining this team was viewed as a step up for anyone in engineering, which fueled Ricardo’s pride and excitement.

Lauren, the director of the group, was known for her straightforward, no-nonsense leadership style. She was often described as intensely driven, technically talented, politically astute, and definitely on the leadership fast track. Ricardo was determined to impress Lauren as his new boss.

Within the first month, however, Lauren’s brusque personality and hands-on approach began frustrating Ricardo. She asked to review everything he did before it went to a client. But what annoyed him most was that she always made revisions to his work. It was never good enough.

Lauren also ran Ricardo’s work by the team for its suggestions. Although this was her practice for all team members, in Ricardo’s mind this just added insult to injury. Ricardo complained to a friend, “It’s one thing to have my boss tear apart my work, but to invite others to take shots at me ... I get the feeling that I’m an easy target

being the only Hispanic in the group. It's as if they don't expect my work to be any good. A few of my new colleagues took me to lunch to offer support, but I'm not sure I believe all the talk about trust and teamwork. After all, they never seem to pass up an opportunity to critique my work."

For the last report he prepared, Lauren suggested he add a few more charts and graphs. Ricardo argued that this was overkill, but she insisted he change it. To Ricardo, this was an example of Lauren exerting her power simply because she could, which he thought she did frequently. For instance, she typically rushed into team meetings late and then asked endless, detailed questions. To Ricardo, this was way too much time to spend simply to satisfy Lauren's need for control.

Although Lauren was the most difficult boss he ever had, Ricardo knew he needed to make this work. He decided to talk with Lauren about the impact of her management style on his work and dropped by her office to broach the subject. It took a few minutes for her even to look up from her computer, but once she finally acknowledged him, Ricardo began to spill out his frustration about her hands-on style: "I feel like I am stuck between a rock and a hard place. You give me little freedom to operate, so I cannot bring my best work to the table. You don't give me a chance to shine."

Lauren was quick to respond: "Our team is known for its unique style and high standards. Obviously, you don't get it yet. Eventually you will see the wisdom of our team's culture and get the hang of things around here—or perhaps you can find a team that fits your style better." Before Ricardo could say another word, Lauren was back at her computer. He felt shut down and dismissed.

Since then, Ricardo has kept his distance from Lauren and avoided team assignments in favor of tasks that he can accomplish on his own.

Reflection Questions

- Where do you place the responsibility for this difficult work relationship?

- What blind spots does Ricardo have in interpreting his interactions with Lauren and the team?
- What could Ricardo do to improve his relationship with Lauren?

Analysis and Recommendations

Ricardo enjoyed operating as a lone ranger in his previous position and experienced success with that style. However, his current job requires a different kind of interaction. Unfortunately, Ricardo has focused on what doesn't work for him and what he doesn't like about Lauren's management style.

In order to create a better working relationship, Ricardo needs to start by considering Lauren's point of view. She has a highly successful team. She believes that her team is effective because of her high standards. She strives to improve her team's output by critiquing individuals' work, and she expects the members of the group to do the same for one another. Time is precious; she doesn't waste it.

Because he misunderstood—and ultimately passed judgment on—the team's culture of open feedback and collaboration, he failed to win Lauren's trust or secure the support of his team. He didn't see that his teammates were trying to give him feedback about how to work effectively in this environment rather than judging him because of his ethnicity. He failed to realize that his preference for working independently was causing him to lose out on valuable information about the expectations for the work output.

Ricardo has given Lauren little incentive to change a style that has been effective for her to suit the preferences of a newcomer, whom she likely sees as critical of her and resistant to feedback. Consider the way in which Ricardo set up the critical conversation about his frustration with Lauren. Given her schedule and pace of working, she's not likely to be receptive to a serious conversation when he unexpectedly drops by her office. However, Ricardo didn't consider his own role in the reaction he got. He saw it as one more piece of evidence about how difficult Lauren is to work with.

The burden of responsibility is on Ricardo to understand and accommodate the prevalent style of the group before he advocates

for any changes that might better fit his work style. He needs to establish trust and demonstrate that he can contribute to the group's success. He needs to show Lauren that he understands her expectations and will take advantage of the give-and-take process of the team to refine his work.

The Broader Application

If you want a key leader's attention and support, it is incumbent on you to see things from his or her perspective. You must give him or her a reason or incentive to invest in you.

Study the Culture The same skills and work style that made you successful in one part of the organization might not be what is required in a different department, in a different role, or at a higher level within that same organization. In every new situation, you have to learn and adapt to the cultural nuances of that specific group or role. Too often, we are quick to criticize and judge, rather than seek to understand, the new environment. What is the logic behind the way things are done? What goals and values do you have in common with the new team? How can you adapt your work style to the culture of the group?

You can learn the hard way by trial and error, or you can accelerate your learning by building relationships with your manager and colleagues. You might not agree with their point of view about what supports the group to work most effectively, but you will be able to interact more strategically if you understand the culture.

Establish Your Value You need to understand your value proposition from your manager's point of view. Get on your boss's wavelength and determine what's important to him or her. You are not going to be supported to do your best work if you're seen as someone who resists the "way things are done" or expends a lot of energy blaming or criticizing others.

This is not to say that you must always accept the status quo. In fact, part of your value proposition in a new situation is that you bring new perspectives and expertise. However, when you make it

clear to your manager that you understand the prevailing culture, and that your intention is to support him or her and the team, you are in a better position to sell your new idea and fresh approach.

Before recommending a change, articulate your understanding of the team's objectives and how you see yourself contributing to the achievement of those goals. Then you can position your recommendations or request for a different kind of support as something that will enhance your contribution. Finally, always ask for input: is your suggestion something your manager can support? When it's clear you're aligned with what's important to your manager and open to feedback, you are much more likely to get a receptive response.

Choose to Expand Your Impact

As a store manager, Amir was attentive to the needs of each shift and made sure he was there for his staff. He often commented to friends, "My employees know that I am always available to them. No matter what time of day, they can count on me to immediately come in and help fix a problem." At company headquarters, Amir had the reputation of being a hard worker with a can-do attitude who never says no.

Amir chose to work for a large retail chain because he saw potential for upward mobility. He sought a job at this particular company because it emphasized the value of diversity and inclusion at the corporate level.

After two years with the company, Amir's strong outcomes as a store manager resulted in his being promoted to district manager. In this position, he became responsible for ten stores, each of which had revenues of \$1 million to \$2 million annually.

When he managed one store, Amir was able to have contact with the staff every day. However, managing ten stores spread across the greater metropolitan area made this impossible. It was difficult to visit each store regularly, much less spend the amount of time with staff that he had in the past. Building relationships and trust seemed to take forever.

Sensing his frustration, Amir's boss candidly talked with him about his store managers' perceptions: "Due to the company's recent

initiative to increase diversity at leadership levels, the talk among many of your direct reports is that you were promoted to district manager only because you're a person of color. They're waiting to see if you are competent and can hold your own. But don't let that get to you. You had great sales numbers as a store manager."

It really shook Amir to know that he was managing people who didn't like or trust him. He became determined to prove them wrong. Many things that he normally might have delegated to them he instead did himself. As a result, he was working sixty to seventy hours a week just to keep up. The jump from managing one store to managing ten stores was overwhelming him, and he was becoming less and less confident that he had what it took to be a successful district manager.

Right before the end of the fiscal year, the national store director issued a very ambitious goal for all markets, demanding a 10 percent increase over last year's same-store sales. Amir saw no relief in sight, and burnout was imminent. He thought to himself, "I've always had a can-do attitude and have never given up, but I just don't see how I can work any more hours than I am currently." Weighed down by what he perceived to be an unrealistic goal, Amir immediately felt his energy flag, and his focus shifted to how out of touch corporate leadership was and the downside of working for large retail chains.

Reflection Questions

- What might be some of the root causes of Amir's burnout?
- What does Amir need to do differently to improve his effectiveness in working with his staff?
- How should he approach the 10 percent increase in his revenue targets?

Analysis and Recommendations

Amir has taken on a new position, but he has not adopted a new way of operating. Even as a store manager, he spent his energy "fixing the problems." He developed a reputation as someone who got things done and produced excellent results. However, his success as a store

manager was based too heavily on what he alone could accomplish. His approach to his work didn't suit his hard-won promotion with its expanded responsibilities.

In addition, choosing not to delegate showed a lack of trust in his people's skills and experience and made Amir less effective as a district manager. This fed his team's doubts about his expertise, which is making Amir less confident in his role.

Although it can be a bit daunting to give up day-to-day control and trust that others will handle situations and meet the same high standards, Amir needs to focus on developing his staff's independence. He could begin by instituting a set of guidelines to help his staff know when to involve him, which would ensure accountability for meeting his expectations. Over time, he could expand their confidence and expertise by letting them handle certain problems without his involvement and then report the outcomes in their regular touch-base meetings. He could also outline the situations where they should bring him into the loop immediately. Typically, these would be situations that require unusual budget expenditures or that might have ramifications beyond the immediate store in regard to policy or customer satisfaction.

The other problem Amir has to address is the 10 percent sales increase. He doesn't really know whether that's an achievable goal; it certainly doesn't seem so at this point. Amir needs to figure out the percentage he feels is a realistic but challenging goal. Is it 5 percent or 7 percent? Instead of focusing his energy on what he perceives to be an unrealistic goal, he should commit himself to taking the steps required to hit a goal he is confident is a stretch, but achievable.

Focusing his energy on an incremental goal does two things. First, it keeps his attention directed on what he can do rather than what he can't do. Second, by staying engaged in stretching his organization's sales revenue, he gets exposed to new information and new possibilities. He gets to see which strategies are increasing sales and which ones aren't. It's possible that the results of his efforts to hit the moderate risk target he set for himself will open up strategies for hitting the 10 percent target he originally thought was unrealistic. And if it doesn't, Amir will have data to back up the merits of the increase he did accomplish.

The Broader Application

In the trajectory of most careers, technical expertise—being the doer—is the driver of early success. You’re known as someone who can get things done. For this, you are rewarded with a bigger span of control and the opportunity to be responsible for getting more things done. At this point, you need to make a dramatic shift in how you get things done.

Change the Way You Contribute Your accomplishments can no longer be the result of your individual efforts. Rather, your accomplishments need to come from contributing through others—developing others’ capabilities to solve problems and deliver quality work. To hold on to being a doer is a recipe for burnout for most people—just like it was for Amir. The relative importance of your technical expertise must decline over time and be replaced by the expertise to get work done through others. You might still know a lot about the topic, but your biggest impact will come from your relational and influence skills—the connections you can make and the resources and staff you can bring to bear on a problem.

Set Moderate Goals and Improve Incrementally Consider how you respond when you have been given a stretch assignment that seems out of reach. Too often, we spend our time focused on what seems unrealistic about the expectations, rather than figuring out what might be attainable. You can always bring better energy to a situation when you focus on what you can do rather than what you can’t do. Mace Vaughan, a longtime trainer, says, “You can preoccupy yourself or you can occupy yourself.”

When facing an unrealistic set of expectations, break the ultimate goal down into manageable steps. Focus first on a target that seems achievable in the short run—not a sure thing, but a goal that requires a level of stretch that feels possible to attain with committed, focused, and effective effort. The very process of improving yourself and your results teaches you new skills and opens up new possibilities for reaching your goal. You can then apply that new learning to push out your efforts that much further. Often, the goal that initially seemed unrealistic becomes attainable.

You will need to take some risks. You will need to be willing to work hard. You will need to pay attention to the feedback you receive about how to improve your effort. However, when you lean into learning rather than being afraid that the goal is unattainable, it's often surprising what is possible.

Focus on Influence, Not Friendships Managing people who do not like or trust you adds a layer of complexity to your role as a leader. When you know you are perceived to be different, you might have a higher need to be liked and accepted.

It is important to have good working relationships; it is important to build trust. But effective, trusting interactions are different from friendships. When we focus on being liked, we can undermine our effectiveness to lead and manage. Our colleagues and direct reports need to be held to high standards. They need to take responsibility for meeting those standards, even when it's inconvenient or requires work they don't particularly enjoy. They might need to hear tough feedback. If we're worried about being liked, we can avoid these uncomfortable situations or fail to delegate appropriately.

As a leader, it's likely that there will always be some individuals who are unhappy or critical of your approach. You have to focus on getting results, not making friends. Trust that your respect for others and your effectiveness in getting things done will ultimately translate into respect for you—and that's what counts most.

Choose to Influence

Darnell was a well-liked 29-year-old manager in charge of sourcing diverse suppliers for a global manufacturing company. He was good at his job and conscientiously built strong relationships and networks, both internally and externally, which added to his success and credibility.

Over the past eighteen months, the company has grown aggressively and managed to capture a significantly larger share of the market. This in turn increased its demands on its suppliers. Darnell's role in establishing and maintaining solid partnerships

with key vendors was now critical to the company's sustaining its competitive advantage.

Recently, Darnell found himself stuck squarely in the middle of a contentious disagreement between the company and a longtime supplier. The company was upset that the vendor did not deliver on a few critical specifications and that the product's quality had been inconsistent in the past nine months. The supplier's complaint was that the company had abruptly changed its supply chain expectations in ways that caused it significant additional expense and seriously undermined its profit margins.

Each side was blaming the other for missed deadlines and compromised revenue streams.

The level of animosity was intense. Both parties were on the brink of walking away from the relationship, which Darnell believed would be a serious mistake for both sides. For the company, sourcing new suppliers and getting them geared up for full production was a very lengthy process, which would hamper the company's planned growth. For the supplier, walking away from this longtime account would be a huge loss of revenue.

Instead of letting things continue to erode, Darnell made a decision to solve the problem. Leveraging the credibility and trust he had garnered with each side, he set up a meeting for the key decision makers to meet face-to-face. He knew that choosing to influence this situation represented a significant risk for him as a young manager. The parties at the table would all be at the senior vice president level or higher. Darnell would have no hierarchical authority. How he handled this meeting would either solidify—or destroy—his credibility with the company.

Darnell also knew that if he didn't do something in advance of this meeting, both sides would likely spend it finger-pointing and not make any headway. Darnell spent the week prior to the meeting talking one-on-one with key decision makers on each side, focusing on the things that he knew would bring each person to the table. During these discussions, he listened carefully, making sure he understood the issues that were most important to each side and

where they might be willing to compromise. Although he couldn't promise any solutions at this point, he made sure all the people involved knew he had heard their concerns.

He also deliberately positioned himself to be the lead negotiator. Darnell told the executives from his company, "I've been the one working most closely with this supplier, so I know the issues. I have developed a reasonable level of trust with the key folks, and they will listen if the concerns are broached in the right way."

With the supplier, he positioned himself as an ally: "I'm the best friend you've got at the table, so direct your questions and concerns to me during the meeting. You can trust that I am committed to working toward an outcome that will benefit both sides."

At the meeting, Darnell opened by painting the vision of mutual gain. He clearly articulated how each side was integral to the potential future success of the other. The company would become the supplier's largest customer and provide them with market share they never had before. Likewise, the supplier had technological capacity that the company lacked. The company could provide better service and grow its brand faster with access to the supplier's capabilities than it could on its own.

Every time the meeting started to veer off toward blaming the other side for a problem, Darnell brought it back with the question, "So what can we do to move forward?" He constantly reminded them of the benefits of a positive outcome if they could stay focused on the future. As he told his manager later, "I kept highlighting the potential gains that a restored relationship offered, and I kept reminding them why they had entered into a partnership in the first place. At times I felt like I was doing marriage counseling."

The meeting was a huge success. Each side secured agreements that resolved its most critical issues, and both sides committed to keep working on the points they were unable to resolve that day. Additionally, the company and vendor took major steps toward restoring the relationship and rebuilding trust, and both sides went away optimistic that they could make this work long-term.

Looking back on his experience, Darnell commented to a mentor, "That was the biggest professional risk I've taken in my career

so far. I chose to influence the outcome, and I facilitated a win-win for both parties. The risk paid off big time. It elevated my visibility and credibility within the organization, and it shaped my personal brand as a mover and shaker.”

Reflection Questions

- Prior to the meeting, what did Darnell do well to position himself as someone who could engineer such a strong outcome?
- What did he do well during the meeting?
- How did Darnell leverage the strength of his relationships in this situation?

Analysis and Recommendations

Darnell didn't shrink from the challenge. He was deliberate in taking control; he assumed he could make a difference. Although he was reasonably confident he would be successful, he realized it was a big risk to facilitate an agreement and rebuild this partnership. Therefore, Darnell took an incremental approach, setting up one-on-one meetings to lay the groundwork prior to the meeting.

Darnell had already established good working relationships with both sides. He was willing to leverage the foundation of trust that he had built in order to be a credible negotiator. He positioned himself as someone who could get the parties through the conflict. He made his arguments to each person in light of what he knew about them. He was able to appeal not only to the logic of the situation but also to the more emotional interests and values that each party brought to the table.

He clearly focused the parties on what they had to gain from working through the conflict. Regardless of the obstacles, he kept the parties intent on collaboration rather than letting them get bogged down in the issues that were preventing a workable solution. He communicated a common vision to create a focus on the bigger picture.

The Broader Application

Darnell's approach is a great example of how to go about shaping your own circumstances and effectively influencing those around you.

Choose to Influence Remember that influence is not asking for permission. Effective influencers assume they can shape the outcomes that are important to them—and understand that it might be a gradual process. They seldom think about whether others will let them do what they want. Rather, they focus their attention on the actions required to gather the resources and support to accomplish their desired outcomes.

Build Relationships Effective influencers always work intentionally to develop productive relationships. It is through relationships that you learn about what's important to the other parties. Your connections give you information about what compromises each side is likely to be willing to make and what they feel strongly about. Relationships are the vehicle to build trust that your interests will be protected and that you will honor the interests of others.

Be Willing to Take a Risk There is never a guarantee that you will be successful when you choose to influence a situation. Yet without the willingness to take those kinds of risks, you will never stretch your skills or expand your base of influence. All strong influencers are willing to fail and be proven wrong. They're willing to take strong stands and can hold up under pressure and criticism.

Focus on Mutual Gains You have to understand the interests of the people involved. What does each party see as a win? What are the shared interests? You also have to help others believe in the possibility of achieving those gains. Too often, people get bogged down in the problems and can't see the benefits that are possible. It takes someone with a strong vision of the benefits to keep the parties focused on moving forward.

Professionals who shape their own circumstances also remember that their interests are as important as the interests of others. Although they're willing to be flexible and compromise for the sake of the common good, they don't abdicate their own needs. They represent their desired outcomes respectfully but firmly.

Match Your Approach to the Situation There is no one way to be effective when you choose to influence a situation. Those who are effective in shaping the opinions and actions of others develop a broad repertoire of strategies. They use logic and data. They appeal to emotional interests. They are willing to bargain. Or they create a shared vision. They call on the strength of the relationship. They are willing to be flexible in order to meet the needs of the situation. They realize that all influence requires some give and take, so they keep their focus on achieving what's most important.

Afterword

LOOKING BACK OVER MY LIFE and career, I have to laugh when I remember that I almost declined the invitation to attend that seminar thirty years ago. The experience changed my life. Dr. Jeff Howard challenged all of us to accept full responsibility for our personal and professional development. It's easy to hear his charge of "full responsibility" and miss the significance of truly adopting the mindset it implies. I encourage you to fully embrace the idea that you can produce the outcomes that are important to you through an ongoing process of development.

Wherever you are now in your lifelong journey of development, think boldly about what the future could hold for you. What have you dreamed of? Tell yourself that you can—you will—make your vision a reality. Focus on your possibilities, not your limitations. Step out of your comfort zone and shape your circumstances. Don't let others dictate who you are or what you could become. Always think in terms of next steps. What can you do to move your situation forward? Managing a meaningful life and career is never easy, but you will have more energy and a greater sense of control when you actively choose how you will engage in the development important to reaching your goals. Choosing to manage your life by design gives you strength. It draws you forward.

Don't let yourself be sidelined by difficulties or temporary failures. Understand that no matter how determined you are or how much courage you bring, there will be setbacks. Learn from your mistakes. Use the feedback from your efforts to craft a better approach and keep moving toward your ultimate goal.

Surround yourself with people who will support your development. Build a community that understands what you're about and will create forward momentum for you to get where you want to go. Seek out those who will feed your confidence and your effective effort, especially during times when you are vulnerable to the impact of external challenges.

The Power of Choice principles gave me a way to take control and shape the life and career that was important to me. I hope these principles do for you what they did for me.

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