

Getting Ahead at Work

Some Do's and Don'ts to Help Turn the Situation Around

By Susan Bellows

You went to college and did well. You got an entry-level job and moved up in the company. Yet, for some reason, your advancement has plateaued.

You're not getting the respect, recognition, and rewards your hard work deserves. What are you doing wrong, and what can you do to turn the situation around?

Let's Start with the Don'ts

- Don't complain, gossip, or blame others. All of these behaviors devalue you.

- Don't make up an answer if you don't know it. Instead, say something like, "let me get back to you with the most accurate information." This will avoid jeopardizing your long-term credibility.

- Don't bring your personal problems to the office.

- Don't be afraid to ask for more details on a project you've been assigned. The president of a bank once said to me, "I worry if they don't come back and ask questions."

- Don't try to hide mistakes. Own up to them and learn from them. You'll earn more respect from others when you take ownership.

- Don't be a know-it-all. A little humility goes a long way in building rapport with your colleagues.

Now for the Do's:

- Behave positively and professionally both inside and outside the company. This includes the Christmas party, networking events, and posting on social media. You're always being evaluated. Inappropriate pictures or statements made on social media can and will be used against you.

- Have a can-do attitude. Be proactive about saying 'yes' to new opportunities and challenges. Your willingness to step up will make you more valuable to the company and



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- Contribute constructively at meetings and listen to what others have to say. It's important to understand the perspective of others. The only way this is possible is to be receptive and listen.

enhance your reputation as a team player.

- Build mutually beneficial relationships with vendors, colleagues, department heads, and your boss. Some of the best job referrals come from vendors. An adversarial relationship with a department head could easily sabotage your ability to get your job done.

- Be proactive about your career development. Invest in things like additional training and technology. These actions will increase your value as an employee. They will also make you a more marketable candidate for jobs inside and outside your company.

- Continue learning once you get a job. Go to other departments that involve the work you do, such as marketing if you're in sales, and ask questions that'll help you understand their challenges. Read about your industry. Join outside professional groups to learn more about your field and to build a network of peers.

- Learn communication skills to build rapport with others. Dale Carnegie's classic book *How to Win Friends & Influence People* is a good place to start. Anything you can do to understand yourself and others will be valuable at work and in your personal life.

- Listen attentively and take notes, if appropriate, when gathering information. Ask for clarification if needed. Nobody wants to spend time explaining something and then realize the listener was just nodding, but not retaining the details.

- Offer fact-based solutions, not just your opinion, when making suggestions for improvements in a process.

- Avoid challenging, questioning, and criticizing how things are done when you're new. Later, learn to say these things in a way that doesn't alienate others. Try using softening statements, such as "could I ask you something that might be sensitive?" or "you probably already know this, but..."

- Volunteer for high-visibility projects when you believe you'll be able to contribute. Doing this exposes you to the attention of upper management, who may later offer you a position that leverages the talents they observe you demonstrate.

- Be aware of what you say and how you say it. Your tone of voice can enhance or destroy the message you want to deliver. Avoid asking a question starting with "why." Folks get defensive when they hear this word. It's preferable to say something like, "Tell me more about..." in a soft, non-confrontational tone of voice.

- Be prepared for inevitable change. This includes changes in ownership of the company, the economy, business competitors, co-workers, and your boss. Plan for change and be ready for it.

This is a lot to think about. But being strategic about getting ahead is a little like starting a new job. It's hard at the beginning, and then it becomes second nature. In the long run, it's well worth the effort. ♦

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