

The Most Persistent and Urgent Get Ahead Question

Written by Julie Desmond
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Ernest workers who hope to keep moving ahead in their lives and careers will carry a long list of questions into a career planner's office: How do I network effectively outside of LinkedIn? What unusual avenues do people use to find a job or get promoted? How can I tap into ambiguous leads? How can I ensure that everyone I know knows what I want to do next? These are all variations on a single question: Where do I start?

Today, the best response to these questions, whether you are looking for work, hoping for a promotion, or just a little personal satisfaction, is the same. Start by asking: What am I doing for others?

Begin with a piece of paper and a list of ten names. These are the people closest to you in your work: colleagues, customers, supervisors, friends.

Beside each name, jot a word or two describing something positive each person has done for you lately. You might have to reach for it, but think of something. For instance: Max showed you, again, how to recover a lost spreadsheet; Andre took coffee orders at the meeting; Jill clued you in that your biggest customer is building a new factory...

Finally, jot a word or two about what you have done lately for each of these key connections. If you can't think of anything, then it's time to become more generous with your time and talents.

Many readers will call this sucking up. If you do it right, that is exactly what it is: (S) Simple, (U) Unique, and (C) Cheap. Offer to connect someone with a new customer, pass along the bus pass you're not going to use, forward a relevant email or interesting article from today's paper.

Example: a former colleague now out of state twittered she was having dress code issues within her organization. A recent newspaper article referred to this issue. I sent her the whole section, and she called me when she got it, ecstatic. She was grateful for the article, but also for the other local commentary she'd been missing while working out of town. Will she send me a business lead down the road? Maybe, maybe not. But it opened the communication door and we will continue to talk and email going forward, which is really the point.

"Life's most persistent and urgent question is: What am I doing for others?" When Martin Luther King, Jr said it, he was referring to issues far greater than career planning; his message illustrates the impact that simply giving can have on a community and a life.

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