Career Advancement Strategies for the New Decade: Out with the Old; In with the New

Abstract
The current state of the economy makes it difficult for aspiring young managers, as well as individuals seeking to enter the corporate world, to secure jobs that will ultimately bring them success as employees. This article presents four adages or pieces of conventional business wisdom and then modifies them to be appropriate for today’s current turbulent economy. In addition it presents a “Top Ten” list of specific activities aspiring managers should undertake to help ensure their success.

Key Words
Conventional business wisdom, career advancement for young managers, advice for individuals seeking employment

Introduction
With the unemployment rate at a twenty-year high and organizations slashing positions in middle management, career advancement appears to have become more difficult for aspiring young managers – both for individuals with jobs and those seeking jobs (Bushardt & Larriviere, 2009). The increased challenges and diminished opportunities mean that aspiring managers must be significantly more proactive not only in securing their positions in organizations but also in achieving career advancement. The reality of the new decade is that now, more than ever, recent college graduates and young managers need, at a minimum, to be high achievers to succeed in the corporate world. However, in an environment with many who are willing to work and many
who possess the requisite competencies to succeed, hard work and determination alone may not be the set of skills that differentiate individuals in the competitive corporate world. Finely honed social and political skills are necessary to advance through the employment jungle and up the overcrowded corporate ladder.

Suggesting that social and political skills are necessary is not suggesting that success depends on becoming a Machiavellian character, but rather that career success often depends on understanding the social context within organizations and having a willingness to develop and execute strategies that actively promote one’s career advancement. Regrettably, many of the old adages passed on to, and accepted by, young managers may be incorrect or misleading in today’s organizational climate. The objective of this article is to critique a few of these oft-quoted adages that are supposed to lead to career success but often fail to do so. In addition, specific activities for achieving career advancement are presented and discussed as guides to successful corporate careers.

The Old Adages and the New Advice

It Is Not What You Know But Who You Know

It is hard to think of a saying more often quoted by students and aspiring young managers – often as an explanation for lack of success in the workplace. The quote has risen to the level of a perceived absolute truth among many, but it simply misses the point. In today’s corporate world, “it is not who you know, but rather who knows you that is critical.” One can get to know many people but what builds advancement is who knows you, the context in which they know you, and their impressions of your strengths and capabilities. Aspiring young managers can help
themselves succeed by getting others to know them through developing a broad network, being visible, and demonstrating their competence in multiple venues.

**Find Something You Are Passionate About and Just Do It**

While this piece of advice has some truth and has been the foundation of a number of successful careers, this old adage may be a luxury that few can afford in a tight labor market. A more apt piece of advice is “become passionate about what you are doing,” because it is hard to imagine a successful career without a passion for the various tasks one has to perform. The reality of organizational life is that far too many people are in jobs they were drawn to not because of passion but because the job was an opportunity and it provided financial reward. Successful managers are those who develop and display passion for the job they are currently performing regardless of the task. Passion involves reading and studying in a pursuit of excellence with a belief that the task at hand is one of the most important to be performed.

**Success Depends on Hard Work**

The corporate world is littered with hard workers who were competent but never advanced beyond their initial appointment. While a strong work ethic is necessary to advance one’s career, it alone will not ensure advancement. The challenge of the new decade is to “work smarter, not just harder.” In addition to hard work one must actively promote one’s own advancement and embrace the social skills affiliated with career success. The abilities to adapt to the organization’s culture and employ career-advancing strategies are important components of career success. Hard work is necessary but not sufficient. Success requires attention to corporate politics and social processes.


**Nice Guys Finish Last**

While often quoted by aspiring young managers, this old adage falls short on two counts. First, the reality of the corporate world is that high ethical and moral standards are essential for both building a career foundation and advancement. Long-term success in the corporate world requires that you “do what is right, not what is expedient.” Nothing will cut short a career faster than an image of being ethically challenged. In repeated surveys of executives, ethical standards in subordinates are listed as a prime prerequisite for hiring and promoting (McKay, 2009). Even Machiavelli, while presenting a picture of the successful Prince as amoral, stressed the need to project an image of high ethical and moral standards (Machiavelli, 1988). Clearly demonstrated behavior is the best way to develop and project such an image. Aspiring young managers must realize that there are no short cuts to advancement based on compromised ethics. Second, and equally important to high ethical and moral standards, is how aspiring mangers treat coworkers and subordinates. In most firms the days of cutthroat competition and individual superstars have been replaced by teamwork and collaborative outcomes. Nice guys, in fact, often come to be known by the important people in the organization as team leaders and finish first.

**Specific Activities for Career Advancement**

The proactive behaviors embedded in the strategic quotes presented above, when followed and coupled with a strong work ethic, can differentiate one aspiring young executive from another and facilitate career success for astute individuals. However, the new advice and the new quotes do not stand alone. Aspiring managers need a “Top Ten List of Activities Associated with Career Advancement” to assist in their career development; and while David
Letterman always presents his lists in ascending order, we recognize that in different organizations the following activities will be of different importance. Therefore, in a semi-random order, we present our “Top Ten List of Activities Associated with Career Advancement.”

**Establishing a Social Network**

Networking is part of the process of getting others to know you. A common mistake of some young managers is to select their friends in the organization based on a set of shared demographics. It is important to develop a diversified network across organizational lines independent of age, gender, race, and social status because individuals different than oneself are a rich source of information. In addition, the network should be much broader than the current organization and include membership in professional organizations and industry associations as well as local civic organizations such as Rotary International, the Lions Club, Friends of the Public Library, etc. These relationships increase the number of people who know you and also provide an opportunity to demonstrate one’s professional competencies by assuming active roles within these organizations. Gender is a particularly sensitive issue in social networking and one needs to guard against being perceived as “one of the girls” or one of the “good old boys” by virtue of having only same gender, same age members in a social network or seeking an office traditional to one’s gender.

**Looking Both Ways**

While individuals in complex organizations regularly look to supervisory personnel for career clues, those successful in career advancement also take the time to look down the
organizational ladder and build social network relationships with those who, most likely, will not directly affect their promotions such as the maintenance and administrative staff. Higher-level management will often consider how the aspiring young manager treats those who are lower on the ladder. In addition, by including in one’s network those in less visible positions, one develops friends and allies who can be helpful in advancement. Knowing people by name, asking about their families, and bringing the occasional box of donuts or pastries can go a long way towards building and strengthening relationships.

**Increasing Visibility**

Career advancement is often contingent on being visible to individuals who are making decisions regarding career advancement. Successful aspiring managers are individuals who are willing take on new jobs, seek challenging tasks, and show a willingness to accept responsibility. While these opportunities may be hard to find within one’s employing organization, civic, social and professional organizations (as mentioned earlier) often afford opportunities where one can demonstrate leadership, organizational skills, and a willingness to accept responsibility.

**Socializing**

The art of socializing with superiors, subordinates, and peers is often difficult for young managers. When the opportunity to socialize with the boss develops, one should seize the moment, appreciate the opportunity, and avoid the pitfalls. A good rule when socializing with one’s boss is never to raise issues concerning work at a social event. Of course, when socializing with one’s superior or supervisor, it should be remembered that he or she can bring up issues from work and you, as a subordinate, should be willing to have the discussion if the boss wants
to talk about work. In addition, wise counsel suggests avoiding mentioning to others at your work that you socialized with the boss because some individuals may become jealous of a perceived friendship relationship. Socializing with subordinates can be difficult with a number of pitfalls. You should make it clear that you are not there to discuss work issues that they bring up. Simply cut this line of conversation off with “let’s leave work issues at the office; this is a social gathering.” Additionally, one must be careful when socializing with subordinates that other subordinates do not feel left out. Socializing with work peers presents a different set of challenges, particularly in larger organizations, because these are your competitors for future positions. At the same time, these are the individuals with whom you probably have the most in common demographically. While one should always be polite, one should not drop his/her guard and/or share too much personal or professional information that could somehow later be misused. Extra caution should be employed at after-work “happy hours” with co-workers.

**Improving Social Skills**

Business schools graduate thousands of students every year who are technically competent but enter the market with limited social skills – a fact that may hinder their ability to advance in an organization. As an aspiring manager, *Emily Post's The Etiquette Advantage in Business: Personal Skills for Professional Success (2nd ed.)* by Peggy and Peter Post, is an essential element for developing the necessary skill set. Using personalized thank you cards with frequent handwritten notes is an easy and effective way to differentiate oneself and leaves a lasting impression with the recipient. Good table manners are unlikely to get you a promotion, but poor table manners can eliminate you from the candidate pool during the interview process. A limp handshake or one without eye contact may be a costly mistake not only at the interview
but also during one’s career. Other suggestions can be found at
http://emilypost.com/business/index.htm and in How to Work a Room: The Ultimate Guide to
Savvy Socializing in Person and Online by Susan RoAne.

**Becoming Informed and Well-Rounded**

Aspiring managers who wish to promote their careers should read current popular books
in management, The Wall Street Journal, and at least one magazine such as The Economist on a
regular basis. These are readily available at the public library as well as on-line. International
travel, coupled with knowledge of the fine arts (art, music, and theater), helps create the
impression of an upwardly mobile manager and often allows the aspiring young manager to
develop conversations with those making the decision on advancement. While international
travel may not be possible due to work schedules and financial constraints, one can befriend new
immigrants or members of the international community and thereby gain at least some insights
into other cultures and broaden one’s perspective. Today’s global economy, coupled with an
aspiring manager’s desire for upward mobility, requires demonstrating an appreciation of the
multicultural nature of the world.

**Seeking Mentors**

Research studies indicate that individuals with a mentor are more likely to be promoted
and enjoy larger salary increases, higher job satisfaction, and greater perceived career success
than those who do not have a mentor (deJanasz, Sullivan & Whiting, 2003). Mentors can be a
key for upward mobility within one’s career, but the relationship also presents a number of
challenges for the mentee. In pursuing this avenue of career support, the aspiring young
manager should devote time to the study of relationships and examine criteria and strategies for selecting a mentor (Bushardt, Fretwell & Holdnak, 1991). While one is often presented a choice between a pull strategy and a push strategy as a way of achieving upward advancement goals, success more often depends on employing both a pull strategy (having a mentor, sponsor, and/or supporter) and a push strategy (successful job performance).

**Adjusting Personal Image**

The corporate world is a world of images and aspiring young managers should engage in impression management. While it is important to be a hard worker, it is equally as important to project the image that one is a hard worker. This may be accomplished by arriving at work early and leaving work late. The worst image one can cultivate is to be thought of as the person knocking down others at 5:00 trying to get out of the door. In addition, going to the office on weekends sends a strong message that you have an owner’s mindset and not that of a clock-puncher. The way one dresses also sends a powerful image to those who are going to make promotion decisions. Recognizing that attire varies considerably by industry and organizational culture, the aspiring young manager should dress, within reason, not for the position that he or she is currently performing but for the desired next position. It should go without saying that if you are an aspiring young manager or someone seeking employment, you should do whatever you can to “clean up your act” on Facebook and other social media outlets.

**Assessing/Improving Personal Traits**

Organizational advancement often depends on the personal traits the aspiring young manager brings to the organization. It is important to appear confident and self-assured. Of
course there will be those times when one has feelings of insecurity and doubt, but these should not become part of one’s persona. Successful aspiring managers learn to cope with feelings of uncertainty while projecting a confident mental attitude. All individuals have strengths and weaknesses and those who advance within the organization tend to be those individuals who have self-awareness.

Many years ago, one of the authors had the opportunity to ask a very successful Business School Dean how he managed to maintain a career as Dean at the same institution for thirty-seven years when the typical institutional tenure of a Business School Dean was three to five years. His answer was very informative, “I was never vindictive.” Personal slights or insults are, indeed, part of organizational life but successful managers tend to be those individuals who are not overly sensitive or overly responsive to unkind words (even at the times when others speak ill of one’s spouse or mother). Vindictive behavior may, in the short run, feel good and punish the other person, but it will surely destroy the upward mobility of an aspiring young manager.

Loyalty is a personal trait that is highly valued by most managers who are making promotion decisions and, as an aspiring young manager, one should display this quality by never speaking ill of the boss or allowing others to do so in one’s presence. While all managers have weaknesses, career advancement is enhanced by speaking of such weaknesses only when forced to and only in a positive light with a positive spin while attempting to be balanced in discussion and stressing the strengths the manager brings to the task.
Managing Time

Another key component of career success is having effective time management skills. The manager’s job is a demanding one and the suggestions for career enhancement proffered here also require the consideration of the time that many young managers feel they do not have available. Time management encompasses goal setting, planning, and task organization as well as a host of techniques for improving workflow for greater efficiency. While a detailed description of time management is beyond the scope of this article, many resources are available from the Internet. One particularly useful source is [http://www.about.com/lr/time-management](http://www.about.com/lr/time-management) that offers a number of articles on time management and is a good starting point for developing effective time management skills.

Summary

Climbing the corporate ladder is more challenging today because there are fewer rungs on it due to the elimination of many management positions from corporate downsizing and the practice of lean management. Current economic conditions with high unemployment also bode for a more challenging climb for the aspiring young manager. With a large pool of motivated and competent people in the labor force, individuals must be competent at their vocation and willing to work hard when given the chance. Competence and hard work are prerequisites for career advancement, but they are likely to be insufficient, by themselves, for advancement.

Aspiring young managers must differentiate themselves by abandoning the old adages they may have heard along the way and following new guidelines. The advice for success in the new decade can be summarized by the quotes presented in this article: “it is not who you know,
but rather who knows you that is critical; become passionate about what you are doing; work smarter, not just harder; and do what is right, not what is expedient.” For those seeking a position, now is the time to begin the process of inventing/reinventing oneself as a highly upwardly mobile professional by following that advice. If one currently has a job, now is the time to start personal management in preparation for the opportunities to come by establishing a social network, looking both ways, increasing visibility, socializing, improving social skills, becoming informed and well-rounded, seeking mentors, adjusting personal image, assessing/improving personal traits, and managing time. Practicing some or all of the suggestions provided in this article may be challenging, but doing them well should create the opportunities that will allow the realization of one’s career aspirations.
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