



5 Ways to Make Your Career Journey a Smoother Climb

By Andrea Carter

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Editor's note: This is the last in the series of Talent Strategy columns from the MIT Center for Transportation & Logistics. In the next issue of Supply Chain Management Review, MIT CTL will start a new column called Innovation Strategies that looks at the development and implementation of innovative supply chain solutions and practices. For more information, visit <http://ctl.mit.edu/>.

People often frame professional development as a climb up the career ladder. However, in my experience, this analogy does not accurately reflect reality, particularly in a dynamic profession such as supply chain management.

I would parallel career progression to climbing a rock face. Whether you're a new recruit or a seasoned practitioner, it is highly unlikely that you will rise through the ranks in a complete vertical ascension. You see, career paths are not narrow, ladder-like pathways; they consist of broad, irregular landscapes. Along the way, you will almost certainly make lateral moves in response to unexpected obstacles, opportunities, and shifting ambitions.

While you can—and should—plan the route ahead, it's important to remain open to change. Here are five pointers that will smooth the way for your ascent.

1. Know the company culture. A common misstep that many people make is trying so hard to impress the new boss that they fail to take time to learn about the company's culture. For example, an individual who aggressively pushes for reforms can easily get off track in an “old

school” company that resists sudden, drastic change. That type of business environment also shapes culture. For instance, while companies in mature industries may be slow to change, companies in fast-moving consumer electronics markets have to be extremely agile and innovative. They often thrive on constant change and new ideas.

Be sure to take the time to find out who the key players are in your enterprise. They may be individuals with a low profile, but they have great influence in the way the organization operates.

2. Performance is important—but keep it in perspective. It's almost a given that you need to bring your “A” game to work. However, standout staff members exceed expectations by pushing the performance bar a few notches higher. They find ways to be creative by, say, actively mentoring, solving problems, and identifying ways to

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improve the organization.

But let's sound a note of caution on the latter point: Suggesting improvements is not the same as constantly pointing out the company's flaws. Individuals—and notably junior employees who may not yet be sufficiently qualified to pass judgment—will soon lose ground if they become known for constant criticism and unwelcome negativity.



3. Pay attention to image. Recognize the importance of personal brand, which is not just your physical appearance. What you say, when you say it, and how you say it, carries weight in the workplace. This is even true for personal conversations that take place in the office. For example, when you are nurturing working relationships, avoid divulging too much personal information.

Professionals who have recently made the transition from the college campus to the workplace need to leave dorm room type conversations about their weekends behind.

Keep in mind that a negative image limits your potential in other people's eyes, even when the perceptions are unfounded, because they are based on gossip or indiscretions.

These vulnerabilities are even more significant in the age of social media. Inappropriate comments posted on personal Facebook and Twitter sites, for instance, can be picked up by employers and undermine your professional credibility and chances for advancement.

Another red flag is being too ready to blame others. In image terms, a reputation for shifting responsibility for setbacks to coworkers is toxic. Enterprises want team players.

Be aware that the type of negative feedback described above can come up during discussions about promotions and assignments. And the higher you progress in the organization, the more vulnerable you are to unflattering descriptors.

4. Have a plan/share the plan. No prizes are given for creating a career plan for how you intend to scale the heights,

even if a career plan is essential to success. But it's easy to overlook the need to share this strategy with others, especially the high-impact individuals mentioned in the first point.

Early in my career, I had aspirations to move to the next level. I was willing to relocate if that's what it took for me to meet my goals. When I was passed over for a promotion, I looked into why the opportunity had slipped away and found that few people in the organization were actually aware of my ambitions and willingness to move.

Drawing up a career plan is only the first step; to put the plan into action you need to communicate it to coworkers, especially those who can influence your career.

5. Network. Again, this is not a revelation, but networking has taken on a new significance in today's cross-functional, global work environment.

It is no longer enough to confine your networking circle to the function in which you operate. These days, your sphere of contacts should encom-

pass colleagues in other departments and geographies. Although you may not be in their organizational hierarchy, leaders of other teams and departments can still vouch for you when promotions are under discussion.

Looking beyond your immediate functional area or locale is becoming especially important in the supply chain field. Operational teams are often dispersed across multiple countries and cultures. What's more, supply chain often connects with other disciplines such as finance and marketing. The likelihood that you will be involved in cross-functional teams or initiatives is greater than ever.

Don't overlook leaders who are external to your organization. For example, an aspect of supply chain management currently gaining importance is the ability to communicate with trading partners such as core suppliers. Even though these parties are external to your enterprise, endorsements from them can help to build your reputation as a top professional.

Spread your net as wide as possible; who knows where the next job opportunity will come from, or how you will come across information on a job opening that you had never even considered before.

Like rock climbers, supply chain professionals need to develop a keen sense of which footholds offer the most leverage in their careers. As you progress towards the summit of your ambitions, you will probably have to move sideways or even suffer some slips, but these setbacks are opportunities to regroup and launch a better route to the top. □