

The First Essential Strategy for Career Success

By Jennifer Selby Long

The first essential strategy is almost too simple to be true: put real effort into maintaining relationships.

Take this responsibility off of the back burner. It may not be stated in your job description, but it's as essential as the actual work you do. As goes uncertainty, so should go communication, and we're still in volatile times.

You almost can't overdo it in terms of building and maintaining strong relationships.

Set aside a little time every 3 - 4 weeks to ask for feedback from your closest customers, your boss, and of equal importance, the people you work with, including your direct reports.

You don't need to ask all of these questions of each individual, nor should you literally contact each person every time. Start with one or two people and one or two questions, and let the conversation take off from there:

- How am I doing in terms of meeting your needs?
- How well are we working together? Do you have any suggestions for how we can work even better together?
- How well is my approach to communication working?
- Do you receive enough timely information? Too much?
- I often communicate by (email, phone, in person). How is that working for you? Would you prefer another way?

If you're used to taking charge and driving things forward, this approach may feel uncomfortable and the task unnecessary.

However, remember that *many people can successfully drive a project through to conclusion*. What sets apart the keepers is that they get the same result using a process that brings people along, engages them, and shows they care. You're not a mind-reader. You won't know what they want from you if you don't ask.

Jess asked, and what a difference it made...

Jess is a client who catapulted her career after addressing this gap in her working relationships. I interviewed several of her direct reports to get their perspectives on her leadership effectiveness.

Jess is intense, passionate, fiercely intelligent - the epitome of a talented operations leader. I found out that she was driving so hard, and was so intimidating in her style, that when men saw her coming, they ducked into the men's room just to avoid her!

Jess was shocked to learn this, to say the least. She leapt out of her chair and started to laugh and cry at the same time. She had no idea that her hard-driving style was causing such behaviors because she hadn't asked others for feedback on her style. She had been afraid that it would make her look weak.

Jess began asking more questions to engage others in her process, and making a conscientious effort to ask for feedback. She didn't try to change her fundamental nature. She simply adapted it, and in turn, others more willingly adapted to her.

She soon found herself tapped to lead the largest cross-functional project in the company's history, *something she could never have done had she not changed her priorities so that relationships came high on the priority list.*

It was no surprise when she also soon earned a promotion. With her enormous talent, she had always produced results. It was *the way she produced results* that had been holding her back.

All of this growth occurred during a tight job market. She didn't use the relative lack of opportunities out there to delay her own development. She charged full steam ahead.

Often the most difficult part of this essential strategy is just getting started, so make a short list of people you'd like to talk with, and get going with those conversations in the next two weeks.

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