

What's Holding You Back?

By Lin Gensing-Pophal

Lessons from Career Counselors.

What is it that makes some people successful and others just so-so? Why is it that one person may make a suggestion that's met with indifference, while another generates significant enthusiasm for the very same recommendation? The differences in those who "have what it takes" and those who don't are often subtle. They're the sort of differences that career counselors regularly see and deal with.

Are there things you could do to advance your career and your business to new heights? Are you inadvertently holding yourself back?

Margaret Seidler and Marlene Chism are consultants who train companies and individuals to build strong business relationships and become better communicators. They've both found some distinct commonalities among clients who come to them for professional advice. Chief among these commonalities is

a lack of self awareness. Other common downfalls for clients involve relationships and communication skills. Are these issues holding you back as well?

Self Awareness

"I have noticed a pattern in that clients lack reflection in how they manage their work relationships" says Seidler. "This lack of reflection results in low-self-awareness. I help each client develop a core set of interpersonal skills. Part of the coaching process directly addresses how to overcome the low interpersonal skills that have hampered their influence and success."

Chism agrees. Even something as simple as being aware of your facial expressions, she says, can be critical in ensuring success. "When I first started out," she says, "when I disagreed with something, the look on my face would let everybody know." Chism says she has worked to be more aware of her facial expressions and to be "very, very aware of how I'm receiving people."

If you frequently wonder why your ideas are met with indifference or why you just

don't get the respect you feel you deserve, you may lack awareness of some specific traits or behaviors that may hold you back.

What to do? If a professional career coach is not an option, you may want to rely on the advice and counsel of a trusted friend or colleague. Ask for some direct and candid feedback. Then be open to what you hear. Too often we have a tendency to make excuses or discount the feedback we receive. But if you're willing to open yourself up to feedback that may be difficult to hear, you'll make the first step to improvement.

"Holding up the mirror to clients in an honest and caring way is often the breakthrough they have been seeking," says Seidler. "Often, they have been unable to determine what

is preventing them from moving up the career ladder, from influencing others or from having great ideas considered, supported, or adopted. The realization that 'the self' may be the problem and that the problem is manageable through the use of effective interpersonal skills is jarring and exciting, because the client can do

because you're on the way to helping them solve a problem." And through the solving of the problem, Chism says, a successful relationship can be achieved. Relationship development should be strategic, not accidental. "Build relationships with those you need to succeed," Seidler says. "Create networks of relationships across

choose to use." As all Toastmasters know, this is an important ingredient when it comes to career success. Chism says the skills learned through the Toastmasters apply in any speaking situation. Again, self-awareness is critical. "Sometimes people who think they're great speakers, and really enjoy it, aren't

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something about it." "I believe we all have blind spots," says Seidler. "Part of the reflection process during coaching helps make visible a whole new realm of perceptions as to how the client's interpersonal weaknesses impact others. These blind spots often present themselves in the form of projections. That is, something I am critical about in others is really something I do myself and don't like - or something I am afraid of doing or being." Opening yourself up to this feedback - and actively seeking candid input from those around you - can be an important first step in boosting your professional success.

Relationships

Another common problem area among Seidler's and Chism's clients is the development and maintenance of strong relationships. Face it: Our interactions with others - both formal and informal - have a significant impact on how we're perceived. Effective relationships require knowledge of the people we're interacting with. Chism, who is also a professional speaker, says that understanding how to analyze your "audience" is key. "I always say 'look for their pain,'" says Chism. "If you can identify their pain, you have the key ingredient,

your organization - top to bottom and across. Focus your energy on those people who have reputations as being creative problem solvers. Avoid being seen as part of any employee group that whines or blames management for their woes. These disempowered people can take you down with them."

Listening Skills

Communication skills are the foundation for success, regardless of the industry or position you're in. Chief among these skills, says Seidler, is the skill of listening. We've heard it before - we have one mouth but two ears, suggesting that we should spend twice as much time listening as we do speaking. But few of us do this! The skill of listening, says Seidler, "is fundamental, no matter where you work." To hear and understand someone's message demonstrates respect; it does not mean agreement. If you afford others the opportunity to be heard, you will increase your opportunity to be heard yourself. Being heard is directly related to being influential.

Speaking Consciously

The flip side of listening, of course, is speaking. Speaking "consciously," says Seidler, means "speaking with certainty in terms of the words you

that good." Chism, a former Toastmaster, found the coaching and feedback from fellow members very helpful in improving her own skills. "As speakers we don't get that feedback," she says, and encourages people to seek it - whether informally or, as she does at formal presentations, through written evaluation. "Just because it feels a certain way for you," she says, "doesn't mean that's reality." Taking responsibility for the statements you make is also important." Seidler says, "Use direct statements beginning with 'I', to give you power and influence." Self-awareness, relationships and strong communication skills - whether you're working with a career coach, seeking advice from a trusted friend or colleague, or taking a long, hard and honest look at your own behaviors, focusing on these areas can give you the insight you need to boost your success - personally and professionally. "High achievers," Seidler points out, "don't need the motivation to improve - just the means!"

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