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Fredric Neuman M.D.

Fighting Fear

"It's Not What You Know. It's Who You Know"

Whose fault is that?

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Reviewed by Devon Frye



Someone wrote a book—and then a musical—about how to succeed in business without really trying. It was a prescription for what an ambitious person without skills, talent, or brains needs to do to succeed. It was a matter of being in the right place at the right time and saying the right things to the right people.

It was amusing because it alluded to certain aspects of business that we all recognize. People sometimes fail their way up the corporate ladder. Others “rise to their level of incompetence.” It is said—usually by someone who is not progressing quickly in a career—that “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know.”

Every day offers evidence of this thesis. Every day, I hear of someone being promoted because he was recommended by

cause he was the lover (secretly) of the man who ran the company. I know of a secretary who married her boss, then divorced him to marry her boss's boss and then was thinking of divorcing and marrying again to one of the top three officers of this major company. Her business responsibilities rose in tandem.

Many workers are not inclined "to sleep their way to the top." Still others—I'm sure the larger group—do not have that opportunity. I don't recommend setting out on such an adventure. I know of many corporate affairs that ended up with both participants being fired.

I like to think that competence is the most important determinant of professional success; but if it is, it is only over the long run. Anyone who is expert in a particular field can point to someone preeminent in that field who does not know enough to justify his or her lofty position and reputation. One need not be expert to become president of this or that corporation or an authority who is interviewed on television on economics or politics—or psychology.

Some people become "famous for being famous." Usually, their relative incompetence is more or less a private matter, attested to only by workers in the same field; but there are those who fail publicly without loss of reputation. Consider the world of finance, where most experts have their performance actually measured and who can be seen to fall short of the industrial averages year after year. Yet they prosper.

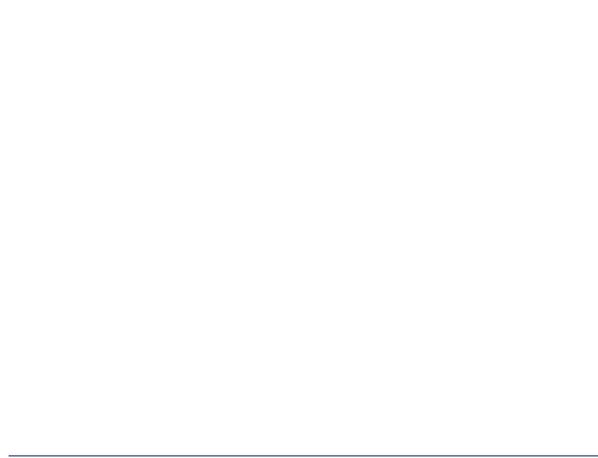
ing at managing still another hedge fund. It is easy to understand how someone in a lesser position who slogs through his work every day, doing the best he can, becomes resentful.

It does no one any good to go around muttering about the various injustices of life. Things are the way they are—and not much different than the way they have always been. But we are not entirely helpless coping with a world where the battle does not always go to the strong nor the race to the swift—nor success to the worthy. It is possible to play by these arbitrary rules and still make success more likely. I do not suggest manipulating or blackmailing anyone. I am not suggesting anything immoral. I am, however, suggesting behaving in a sensible way to promote oneself in ways that go beyond simply doing a job well.

Suggestions

The impression you make at the start of a new job is especially important. During the first two weeks, you will not be fired because of incompetence. That is because everyone expects that it will take you a while to catch on. But other aspects of your work will be noticed.

Be friendly to everyone! That includes colleagues, cleaning personnel and, especially, office assistants. These are all individuals who are in a position, if they are so inclined, to give guidance about what is really going on in the company. They can help you, cover for you, and in other ways protect you—if they like you. These are some of the people you should know that may matter more than “...what you know.”



Stay late the first few weeks. If there is no obvious reason to stay late, find a reason. It is not important to come to work early. No one will notice if you arrive early, but people will notice if you stay late.

About a month after settling into the job, make an appointment to speak to your boss privately. Ask her if she thinks you “have your priorities straight,” or if you should be doing your job somewhat differently. First of all, it makes a good impression to seem to want to improve your performance—it indicates the desire to be responsible and reliable. You should not suggest that you think you may be performing poorly, but there is always room for improvement. Besides, it is possible that your boss may have certain criticisms to make; and it is important to find out about them as quickly as possible. If she compliments you, you will feel more comfortable at your new job.

Take seriously the need to make friends at the company. Someone who is diligent, but shy, may go unappreciated. In large companies friends are often in a position to tell you

If you are working in a technical or scientific capacity, read up about the work that others have done in the company. Go out of your way to demonstrate to them that you are interested in that work. Ask them for time to talk about their work. After a while, you can ask them for an opinion about something you have done, or plan on doing. If someone can do you a small favor easily, that person will feel good about himself—and about you. (If you can do such an individual a small favor, it works that way also.) Big favors are another story. No one likes being indebted to someone they work with.

Go to company parties, luncheons and anniversaries, even if you find these tedious and irrelevant. Be gracious to people who are leaving the company or who are currently out of favor for some reason or another. They may still be in a position to help you. Of course, do not turn down a personal invitation from your boss; but otherwise, hesitate before initiating such a social involvement. (Sometimes you can set the stage for such a personal contact by offering an extra ticket to a ball game or doing something similar.) If you don't think such behavior is appropriate with your particular boss, you are probably right.

If you find yourself in conflict with colleagues or with a boss, take the position that you will say and do only those things that further your purposes. Sometimes you will need to go along with unfair treatment; sometimes you will need to assert yourself. There are even a very few times when you may complain about a boss to a higher up. But *you are not entitled to argue or create a fuss just to get something off your*

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Do not: lie to anyone about anything. Being caught in one lie makes you forever untrustworthy in the eyes of everyone else. Do not avoid admitting mistakes, especially if the mistake can reasonably be expected to come to light—which is usually the case. On the other hand, do not say anything that denigrates your performance! If someone congratulates you on doing a good job, do not say something negative like, “Yeah, but I wish I could have done this also. And it would have been nice if at the same time...” Say, instead, “I’m glad you think so. It was particularly difficult because of such and such and so and so...”

If a client or customer thanks you for doing a good job, tell them that you are pleased that they think so, and it would be a help to you if they would not mind putting that into a letter to the company. Of course, do not take credit for someone else’s work. No short term advantage is worth making an enemy. If someone takes credit for your work, do not lose your temper. Think of some way you can point out your contribu-

for you, make sure you do.

Listen respectfully to everyone, even if what you hear is nonsense. If you are a boss trying to implement a program, it will not work unless you have the enthusiastic cooperation of the people beneath you—and that only comes when they think they are being consulted.

Don't yell at someone who works for you just because your boss yelled at you. Don't turn down a chance for more responsibility—such as managing others—because you think it is beyond your level of competence. Chances are, you can learn from your mistakes. You always want to project self-confidence.

Flagrant buttering-up of a senior officer in the company is not desirable. In principle, flattering a boss might be a good idea, but most people cannot manage to do it convincingly. You do not want to seem insincere. It reminds me of that old joke:

Hollywood agent: All you need to succeed in this town is sincerity; and if you can fake that, you've got it made.

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I would recommend avoiding romantic entanglements at work, if I thought anyone would pay attention to my advice—but about such matters, they do not. I recommend, at the very least, however, not documenting an illicit affair with e-mails and other written communications. If you are like most people, you will probably ignore this advice, too.

Take these suggestions and someday people will admire you for the people you know in the company. Aim for competence, also.

(c) Fredric Neuman, author of *Superpowers*.



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