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SCHMOOZE and You Won't Lose

BY CAMILLE MACCHIO

I RECENTLY ATTENDED A SEMINAR ABOUT CAREER ADVANCEMENT AND the guest speaker, known as the Work Doctor, presented ways to recession-proof your career. She focused on the relationship between a boss and a direct report. As I reflected on the presentation, a statement from one of my clients came to my mind: "I'm really great at what I do, but I feel like I am the best-kept secret in my company." It was this statement that got me thinking that while the relationship between a boss and a direct report is vital, it isn't enough. I hear statements repeatedly from clients who are competent, produce high quality work, and add value to their companies every day, but their potential is going unrecognized. That's not a great recession-proof place to be.

You have superior skills, experience, and work hard, yet the decision makers in your company perceive you as being at a lower level—this happens because you're not on their radar. The nature of today's work environment is that if all you do is put your nose to the grindstone and work hard, you'll develop a reputation as a hard worker and will attract the thankless busywork that never allows you the opportunity to showcase your true leadership capabilities. You've fallen prey to what I call the "worker-bee syndrome." If you feel like you are flying under the radar, you may find yourself bypassed for important assignments, missing out on salary increases or promotions, and most importantly, running the risk of being more dispensable in down times.

The solution lies in creating a visibility strategy and taking action to build connections and link with others, because one of the top mistakes people make while trying to advance their careers is working when they should be schmoozing!

The most immediate environment to link is in your own backyard—the broader organization and to your team or unit. If you feel like you've been afflicted by the worker-bee syndrome, it might be a good time to step out of your immediate space and get to know others nearby. Consider the following tactics:

- Ask a colleague to partner with you on a project (you might first need to sell your manager on the idea)
- Find a more senior person in your department with a good track record and good visibility who can act as your mentor

(linking to a mentor may also create support for your career advancement)

- Communicate with people in your unit, at least some of the time, by "bumping into" them—face-to-face interactions are more memorable than emails
- Help out with the next office social function

You can also extend the link to your organization by knowing more about its purpose and plans and understanding how you fit the big picture. Some ways to do this include:

- Asking colleagues about the company's history to learn how it was organized and developed
- Learning about people in other departments and their work, and asking to attend interdepartmental meetings
- Establishing communication links (even informal, over the coffee station) with people from inside and outside your unit
- Finding cross-functional committees or task forces that might help your unit and suggesting to your manager that you would make the time to participate in one
- Finding out how your company's products are viewed in the marketplace

Take the step to become more visible and expand your network so key managers, leaders, and stakeholders are aware of you, what you do, and the value you add to the organization. It can help eliminate your name from the downsizing list. ○

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