

Five Strategies for Personal and Professional Success in 2011

By Rita B. Allen

We have all encountered challenging times throughout our careers and will no doubt experience continued uncertainty even as the market and economy rebound. The best way to empower ourselves is to recognize our value-add and continuously work on enhancing and marketing our brand within our chosen fields. Every January many people select their new year's resolutions with great intentions.

Several years ago, I decided a better use of my time would be to revisit my goals every December—review, reevaluate and adjust as necessary—then start the new year with incredible focus and determination. We all need to have a mission for our career and specific goals we want to accomplish. In fact, one of the key areas that I apply in my coaching model with clients is around goal setting—personally and professionally. Without a plan, we do not have direction nor any criteria for

accountability. Last year, I read about a Harvard Business School Study that supports my theory. It researched their graduates over a 30-year period and found that written goals can translate into earnings of 10 times more than those who fail to establish goals or put their goals in writing! Another recent study conducted by Dominican University over a period of a month (on short-term goals) concluded that those who wrote down their goals with specific action steps and follow up fully realized their goals at a rate of 50% more than those who did not.

As we begin the new year in 2011, getting back to basics and revisiting our goals is an effective way to clarify our vision and set the stage for success. As with everything in life, the foundation for doing so is having a positive and optimistic outlook to moving forward. I believe this quote says it best: *“Success doesn’t come to you—you go to it” (Marva Collins)*. During difficult times, it can be easy to lose focus and be distracted





by the obstacles that get in our way. It takes a lot of resilience to stay true to ourselves and face the challenges head on. Organizations strive to attract the right mix of talent, develop them and keep them engaged to fulfill their business goals and objectives. Leadership can and should be developed at all levels of a company. Each individual can have a plan that empowers themselves to initiate their development and take charge of their careers.

FIVE STRATEGIES FOR ACHIEVING PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL SUCCESS IN 2011

1. Focus on building relationships. Having long lasting and solid relation-

ships is the key to sustaining a fulfilling and successful career. It requires a long-term process to be viewed as laying a foundation and planting seeds for future growth and success. Do not expect immediate gratification—gain momentum and don't stop! Our relationships can sustain us through many phases of our careers and can be incredible resources. Remember that every relationship should be a two-way partnership that is mutually beneficial for each person. There is also a lot of nurturing required to ensure fulfillment. Follow up and regular contact is crucial. There's a formula to establish which involves a mix of planning, sincerity, visibility and outreach, credibility as well as patience and resilience. Execution of this formula can be created within a *Relationship Building Flow* that has a very defined process as follows:

- **Who.** Identify people with whom you would like to establish relationships; include a mix of individuals internal to your organization and external to your industry and discipline.
- **Have a plan.** Invest time and energy into building these healthy and long lasting relationships; spell out specific action items that you will implement.
- **Commitment.** Long term versus short term approach; define and follow through.
- **Execution.** Nurture these relationships by identifying and implementing proactive strategies that deliver high priority attention with discipline and focus.
- **Follow up, follow up, and follow up!!!** Create timelines and measures for accountability.

2. Identify the barriers holding you back. Consistent self-reflection and assessment allows you to build inner strength and unleash your fullest leadership potential. Identify your passion and purpose—stay true to your goals and motivations. There are many tools,

assessments and techniques that can be helpful throughout this process. Identify the ones that are most relevant and appropriate for your individual needs and objectives. In addition, conduct a **Personal SWOT Analysis** as the first step which will enable you to assess:

- **Strengths.** Your strongest areas
- **Weaknesses.** Areas for development
- **Opportunities.** Situations to be seized for development
- **Threats.** Obstacles and potential challenges in the way

Once you do so, you can identify specific gaps and determine appropriate strategies for development allowing you to break through barriers that are holding you back. Determine appropriate strategies for leveraging strengths to take advantage of opportunities as well as to address potential threats. In addition to self-reflection and assessment, positive energy is essential to release what's draining us and keeping us from excelling to our fullest potential. Get rid of the negative talk that can derail progress. Sometimes we allow our fears to play against our vulnerabilities rather than focusing on the positive, capitalizing on our strengths and allowing us to try new things and take a little risk. *Keep an open mind to seek out and embrace all opportunities that may be presented along the way—expectedly or unexpectedly!*

3. Mentor and be mentored. Seek out potential mentors and trusted advisors throughout the different phases of your career. In addition, welcome opportunities to mentor others throughout their careers. Having and being a mentor are two of the major milestones during a career and represent a critical part of managing a successful and sustaining career. We can all empower ourselves to initiate this process rather than waiting for mentors to be presented to us. As a matter of

fact, with four generations in the workforce today, mentorship is defined differently by each generation along with their needs and expectations. Organizations need to create a mentoring culture that encourages and advocates for mentor relationships as a norm and enables these relationships to flourish. Even if you do not have formal mentor programs, employees can initiate and seek out mentors. A mentoring culture will allow mentees to drive the process while providing support and encouragement throughout the process. Follow these *Steps to Developing Mentor Relationships*:

- **Identify what you need.** Determine specific goals and objectives you'd like to accomplish and the role your mentor can play in assisting you to achieve those objectives
- **Reach out to a variety of mentors to meet diverse needs.** Establish and nurture relationships with multiple individuals across many parts of your life
- **Create a strategy that offers value-add and keeps mentors engaged.** Do your homework and be prepared to be challenged, know your personal brand and articulate it effectively
- **Stay true to your vision and your goals.** Be focused and keep yourself accountable, be diligent with initiatives while staying open to new possibilities and paths
- **Communicate, communicate, communicate.** Ask for feedback, be open and honest, show vulnerability and take some risks, always express gratitude and appreciation

4. Develop communication strategies. We can never be too comfortable or confident with our communications skills and our interpersonal abilities. The rules keep changing with the technological advancements and multifaceted resources that are introduced to us every day. Can it be possible to learn, master and get the maximum usage of all of these options all of the time? Probably not . . . we can, however, create a reasonable and achievable strategy that works for us and accomplishes our objectives. It takes discipline, time management and a focus on quality rather than quantity. Create communication strategies that require high standards of excellence and most importantly exude enthusiasm and energy! Dale Carnegie said it best when he said, "Excitement radiates through your eyes, your face, your voice, your soul and your whole personality." Articulating our thoughts with conviction, passion and truth along with sincere expression can make all the difference.

Active listening is just as essential for effective communications. Our ability to be reflective and inquire can make the distinction between communicating and truly having a dialogue. Dialogic communications is an exchange of perspectives, experiences and beliefs in which people can speak and listen openly and respectfully. It is two-way communication that seeks to ensure clarity in understanding and searches for the different threads in the discussion – identifying similarities, differences and other ways of relating ideas. Dialoguing is affirming and supportive yet challenging and reflective. We can create strong dialogic communications in our daily interactions with the following *Building Blocks of Dialogue*:

- **Suspension of judgment.**
Developing an openness, being aware of our own judgments
- **Deep listening.** Paying attention, focusing on the moment, not getting lost in our thoughts
- **Identifying assumptions.**
Peeling an onion to get to different levels of understanding
- **Reflection and inquiry.** Coming up with questions based on your reflection

5. Celebrate accomplishments and express gratitude! There are many victories we do achieve—some small and some more grand. Be sure to acknowledge and celebrate these victories when they do occur. Sometimes they are milestones, sometimes they are full accomplishments, and sometimes they include helping others achieve their goals. Recognize these victories and be happy to celebrate them! It's also just as important to reach out and express gratitude and thank the people who played a role in helping you do so. During these challenges times, there are so many abundances we are blessed for which to be thankful. Optimism and gratefulness are part of the celebration process. *Benjamin Franklin* said it best: *"Life is ten percent what you make it and ninety percent how you take it!"*

It would be nice if we all had crystal balls to see what the year 2011 will bring but given that we do not, it is in our power to be prepared by engaging in strategies that will enable us to succeed. These strategies will allow you to be ready, willing and able to embark on the new year with purpose, drive and focus! Congratulations for beginning year 2011 and best wishes for much success this year and for many years to come! ■

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