

STAYING IN THE PASSING LANE:

Six Prescriptions for Rising Talent

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ABSTRACT Superbly trained marketing communications talent is flooding the job market from good, better, and the very best schools around the world. You may be one of these emerging talents, the so-called, "rising stars." This article is about stacking the deck in your favor. Six prescriptions are offered for building skills and instincts that enable emerging marketing communications professionals to keep their careers in the passing lane.

Superbly trained marketing communications talent is flooding the job market from good, better, and the very best schools around the world. You may be one of these emerging talents, the so-called, “rising stars.” You have earned the opportunity to make distinct contributions towards the future success of organizations. You have got game!

After graduation, you will restart your career at a higher level of responsibility and compensation. Senior leaders may deem you “high potential.” Peers may label you a “prima donna.” Unavoidably, you will be monitored more closely than others. Some day, you expect to run the department or branch out into general management, but will early career missteps stall your career?

The answer is not likely in the technical skills you have honed over the last several years. By the time you rise to manager, a career decision will be made by your organization regarding your upward potential. You will be slotted in your company’s version of a nine-cell grid. Those assessed as “high potential” will continue to climb, others will stall, and the rest will move on. Career navigation is always uncertain. Along the way, some rising stars become fallen stars, sometimes because of a lack of skill, energy, or aspiration, and sometimes because the competition is just better. Sometimes, luck plays out. Sometimes, you just do not know how the deck is stacked.

This article is about stacking the deck in your favor. Six prescriptions are offered for building skills and instincts that enable emerging marketing communications professionals to keep their careers on the rise. Six Prescriptions to Keep Your Career on the Rise

1. *Be Trustworthy*

No personal characteristic is more basic and no recovery is more difficult than rebounding from a breach of trust. Trust is defined by the four components depicted in Figure 1.



Figure 1: Components of Trust

The perception of competence is an assessment of knowledge, skills, and demonstrated abilities. The focus is on “can do” factors.

- Do you accurately represent your skill level and refrain from exaggerating or embellishing?
- Do you have a well-developed point of view about challenges, risks, and opportunities?
- Do you shoot carelessly from the hip?

The perception of reliability is an assessment of dependability, the “will do” factors. Assessment determines if others believe you.

- Do you make promises and keep them?
- Do you overcome obstacles to deliver on time and within scope and budget?

The perception of intentions is the assessment of behaving in ways that are motivated by mutually serving versus self-serving motives, i.e., are we “together on this matter”? You are judged by your:

- Success in finding common values and common ground; and
- Ability to clearly communicate purpose, targets, and methods without nuance or equivocation. No surprises. Tell the whole story.

The capacity for trust is a self-assessment regarding the level of risk or vulnerability one is willing to accept. This ranges from none to full exposure. A narrow capacity for trust may limit a potential relationship to basic transactional exchanges. Conversely, blind trust is naïve and dangerous. Trust building begins with small exchanges, after which a “provisional assessment” is made. Then, as a result of multiple exchanges, relationships may grow into sound partnerships.

2. *Understand Your Brand, Your Reputation*

This is your livelihood. Without a clear understanding of your reputation, you fly blind. Conduct a rigorous self-assessment of your critical thinking skills, personality, values, and motivational drivers. Learn your strengths and deficits. Understand how your brand impacts key people around you [up, down, and sideways]. Figure 2 represents these elements.

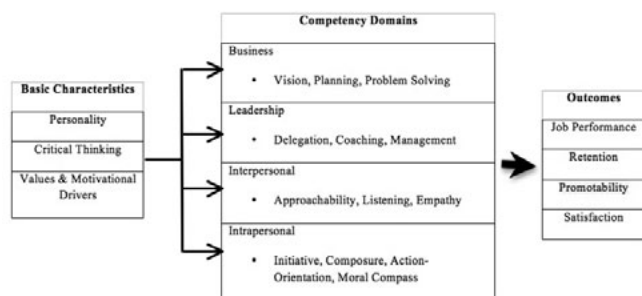


Figure 2: Linkage of Characteristics and Competencies to Job

Bottom line: Your brand is a composite of your credentials, trustworthiness, capacity for critical thinking, personality, and career ambition. Understand how your brand plays in your marketplace and how it “slots” you among professional colleagues. Which doors are opening? Which are closing?

3. *Be in the Middle of Strategic Change*

Rising stars are often invited to participate in major change projects affecting the strategy and structure of a business. Change projects provide lessons of experience critical to the development of an organizations’ cadre of rising stars. While these projects are certainly useful for building technical “tool kits”, they are exponentially more valuable opportunities to observe senior leadership in action (the real dynamics of decision-making). How do their values play out? Change projects allow rising stars to observe dimensions of organizational culture and the reality of organizational politics. Senior leaders may likely regard these projects as your audition for the next job opportunity. Simply stated, if you are not meaningfully involved in change projects, your career is likely stalling. Get involved!

Change agents are geared to be disruptive. They pursue important causes and are expected to be dissatisfied with the status quo. Their work often attacks legacy processes and the people who “own” these processes. Beware, participation comes at a price. Disruptive behavior may fatigue an organization, raise resistance, and evoke unease among the organization’s stakeholders.

The half-life of change agents is typically shorter than members of the traditional workforce. Drive, risk-taking, assertiveness, perseverance, and extremely high achievement motivation make change agents valuable resources for navigating change, but vulnerable targets for discredit, resistance, and political push back. They can be difficult to manage during projects and even more difficult to “wind down” and repatriate at the conclusion of a project.

While navigating change is tough, surviving the change may be even more challenging for change agents.

Change agents may self-destruct. Trouble brews when change agents:

- Cannot effectively perform their technical tasks and professional work;
- Rack up chronic relationship problems with peers;
- Fail to forge strong bonds with project leadership, thereby becoming politically isolated or outright toxic;
- Fail to win leadership support and “air cover” during attacks by adversaries;
- Over-reach their change mandate; and
- Allow projects to become too personal.

As discussed above, when the heavy lifting is finished, organizations often have difficulty returning change agents to “good” jobs in the new status quo. These organizational warriors are not unlike combat soldiers returning from the battlefield. To keep your career on the rise, be weary of projects that:

- Are interesting and developmental, but NOT vital to the future of the organization;
- Have fuzzy mission statements;
- Are led by technical experts or first-time project leaders with limited experience in bridging silos;
- Suffer from insufficient funding and resources;
- Fail to have clear and guaranteed pathways for the change agent back into the organization following the project;
- Have project leaders who do not have the political clout to protect game changes from attack and discredit; and
- Do not acknowledge successful change agents as winners, heroes, and role models.

4. *Be Politically Savvy*

Most graduate institutions teach job content, i.e., technical job knowledge and skills. Across a career, content skills are continuously honed and supplemented. Rarely are senior leaders deficient in job content areas. But, individuals who successfully ascend organizational hierarchies have developed competency in another critical area: savvy or organizational politics. Brilliant professionals will stall and derail if they are unable to read political cues. An astute understanding of the political landscape can be the difference between clumsy missteps and savvy navigation as your career ascends. Figure 3 summarizes the political factors deciphered by politically savvy leaders.



	Factor	Mental Checklist
Core Issue	Whether the issue is central to the company's vision, mission, or viability.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What can be won? • What can be lost? What is at risk?
Status Check	What actions are already underway and what has already been attempted. What options remain available? How much time is left on the "clock"?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Why am I being involved now? • Who is accountable? • What facts are known? Unknown?
Players	Individuals/coalitions participate and have considerable power to stop, derail, or accelerate an initiative. They judge and influence opinion.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who is involved? Who is on the sidelines? • Cliques, elders opinion leaders, gate keepers? • Sources of power and influence? Used before? • Where are the silent vetoes?
History	If a base line exists, which prevailing expectations have been established? The nature and degree of challenge must be understood.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What has history taught us? • Readiness, willingness, fatigue, confidence? • What do others predict I do? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ◦ Act: Initiate, invest, launch? ◦ Hold: Study, investigate defer, wait? ◦ Stop: Abandon, restudy, retreat?
Values in Spotlight	Practices will be heavily scrutinized and influenced by values, principals and the code of conduct. Determine the critical values.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Humanity: Respect, honor, dignity, privacy • Fairness: Crediting, favoritism, balance • Humility: Compassion: protection, helpfulness
Freedom to Act	Resources, time, and management attention should to be limited.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Quality, quantity, control of resources • Time available • Decision choices, necessary decision style?
Scorecard	Metrics need to be understood and agreed upon.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Who determines the scorecard? • Are the variables objective/subjective, quantifiable/qualifiable?
Protocol	Ceremony, signs, and symbols carry weight.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Degree of inclusion v. exclusion • Cultural norms and social courtesies • Communications routes and confidentiality • Which rings to kiss • Red flag awareness • How and when to "say no" • The "small stuff" matters

Figure 3: Reading Political Cues

5. *Be Well Networked*

Professional networking is a disciplined approach to meeting and engaging people in a mutually valuable relationship. It is not aggressive, hyper-social, or over-the-top glad-handing. Regrettably, young professionals chronically neglect professional network building. At times, they are aware that they need more “juice”; they need help. Consequently, they hurriedly attempt to activate their professional [or social] network. Predictably, their networks do not respond very well and fledgling relationships dry up in nanoseconds. Their transactional exchanges fail to produce results, and they are often disillusioned by the poor dividends.

Get a copy of Ricky Steele’s book, *The Heart of Networking*. It is the bible for the etiquette, tactics, and strategies necessary for network building. Your career progress will be a measure of your grasp of Ricky’s networking prescriptions.

A professional network is designed like an airline route system—a hub and spoke architecture. The hubs of your network represent centers of information, expertise, resources, opinions, and power. Spokes connect them; these are the people who can connect hubs for the exchange of information, formation of coalitions, acceleration of decision making,

and risk avoidance. Spokes know “hubs” and how to access them. The key elements of professional network building are highlighted below.

Is your network built with purpose and focus? Your professional network is NOT your social network. It is a collection of business partners, advisors, and confidants who are seriously interested in your success AND theirs. They may be with you for the rest of your life—guiding you towards opportunity and success, helping you rebound from personal and career challenges (e.g., job loss), and celebrating your wins.

Consider what you want your professional network to do for you? Understand that your blueprint will change over the course of your career. Start with three questions: 1) Where do I want to go? 2) What help will I need along the way? 3) What help can I offer my partners to invest in our mutual relationship?

Be interesting. Interesting people share four characteristics. First, they are curious and investigative. Curiosity generates great probing questions and sound investigators avoid coming across as intrusive. Second, interesting people challenge their world. Their risk-taking leads them down a path of adventure. They have stories to tell about their personal wins, loses, and lessons learned. Third, interesting people are skilled in presenting their opinions and passions. They fearlessly speak their mind without coming across as dogmatic or arrogant. Finally, interesting people have presence. Their impact, delivery, and social skills attract others.

Communicate your values with passion. Chance interactions, crowded venues, group meetings, and initial introductions demand that you present yourself succinctly and interestingly. Your presentation is often called your “elevator speech.”

Skilled networkers practice their elevator speech. It should convey achievement, passion, and your destination, all while motivating others to learn more about you and explore the common ground. Your message should distinguish you as interesting, approachable, and valuable.

Give generously; take sparingly. A professional network is not a trough. It is best to invest first and draw dividends later.

Extend your network beyond your inner circle. Your inner circle is comprised of friends, typically with similar expertise, opinions, and contacts. Their hub and spoke map largely duplicates yours. So, you must network beyond your inner

circle. Your most valuable networking contacts will be among current strangers — people in your second or third ring of acquaintances. Well-chosen and cultivated, these people bring different insight, perspective, and fresh contacts to your network. Invest time in these outer rings. With constructive and continued effort, these people move from acquaintances to full relationship partners, and you will become more interesting and better connected.

Build a network that can take you up, down, sideways. Sideways is easy. Social networking puts you in this channel most every day. Upward networking is more challenging because rising stars fail to believe they offer value in this direction. Find ways of becoming more interesting and relevant to the next upward generation. Share relevant articles and editorials, YouTube clips, deals, your achievements, insights and breakthroughs, and your experiences. Downward networking may seem like a waste of time, after all, these people walk in your footsteps. Wrong! Smartly targeted and developed, these relationships offer breaking news; valuable information on emerging issues, grassroots events, and importantly, you can help them along.

Be prepared to say no. Be selective. Contacts in your professional network will ask you for access and introduction to others in your network. It is best to be cautious and maintain the confidentiality of your network partners until you assess the constructive and respectful nature of a request to connect. “Saying no” for the right reasons will protect and strengthen your credibility as a networker.

Show up in the right places. Bill Gates, Sr. stated that half the battle in life is showing up. His advice is critical when it comes to networking. Contribute and be seen in a range of extracurricular activities including your alumni association, volunteer and not-for-profit organizations, professional associations, company organizations, and social clubs. These venues present superb opportunities to engage senior leaders with whom you might otherwise not have access. Learn from them, mingle with a message, help them, show off your passions, and develop them as bona fide members of your professional network.

6. Latch on to the right mentor

Great mentors are in short supply. They are your eyes and ears around an organization or your profession. They help you anticipate and understand organizational change and drama. Sometimes, they signal you to keep your head down. Other times, they encourage you to stand tall and be visible. They

understand your skill set, how it aligns across silos, and supports organizational progress. They open doors you cannot. They know the available career paths, the dead ends, the trap doors, and have significant knowledge of those who passed through the same gauntlets before you.

Mentoring is a two way street. Even the most dutiful mentee must bring value to the table. How can help your mentor? How will you remain relevant and interesting? Most organizations offer mentoring. These programs are “two-fers.” The experience is used as a management development opportunity for high potential mid-level management talent as well as the rising stars (you!).

You will change jobs. Therefore, look for mentors outside your organization. Your professional network should contain network partners two or three levels up from you. When your mentor is only a step or two above you organizationally and learning the ropes herself, temper your expectations about the value of the experience. Your mentor may be well intentioned, but may lack the perspective and the “juice” to help you navigate.

Great mentors are acknowledged as seasoned and successful in your company or profession. They have both sound content knowledge and political savvy. Moreover, they will:

- Make time for you;
- Create a confidential, supportive environment for discussion;
- Challenge you with tough questions about your motives, skill set, best work processes, and tactics; and
- Help you see multiple paths to completion or success.

Final Thoughts: Are You in the Conversation?

With your re-entry into the working world, you must decide what business conversations you wish to be a part of— narrow and specialized, or broad and general. Peter Mandeno’s company, Wok & Wine, has carved out a global mission to help young professionals appreciate and build relational versus transactional connections. Relational competency is built upon your trustworthiness, political savvy, sound reputation management, showing up in the right places, and latching on to mentors who can open your mind, open doors, and protect your career from trap doors. Human connections built upon relational competency enable you to dial up collaboration whilst dialing down interpersonal competition. With attention to these advantages, you will stay in the passing lane. ■



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BoardQuest provides governance services to Boards including board candidate recruitment and assessment, board off-site meetings, and consultation. Patrick is an author of numerous articles on corporate governance, compensation and risk topics. He serves on the Board of the National Association of Corporate Directors- Atlanta Chapter, and on the advisory board for Kennesaw State University's Corporate Governance Center. Dailey also serves as faculty for the University of Georgia's Terry College of Business Annual Board Governance Summit.



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