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Get Ahead This Year In Five Simple Steps

By Perri Capell

It may sound like a paradox, but you can focus too much time on your job at the expense of your career. Chris Smith, a 47-year-old executive laid off in October, says he did. The former general manager of CellStar Corp., a Carrollton, Texas-based wireless-handset-and-accessories distributor, says he should have spent more time meeting and talking with customers and vendors to build a larger personal network. Now that he's job hunting, he's finding that his greatest source of leads and opportunities comes from those contacts.

"When you're buried in your current job, you say to yourself, 'Gee, I have too much work to do here to go on that next trip and see people,'" he says. "You must resist that temptation and get to know more and more of the key people in your business and your industry and develop relationships that extend beyond your current position."

In his next job, he plans to create a spreadsheet that tracks his monthly efforts to stay in touch with key people in his network. "I want to make sure in checking off the months that I made a contact with that person, whether over the phone or a visit," Mr. Smith says.

A Career Check-up

It's time to give yourself a career check-up and make sure you're doing enough to invest in your future. Ask yourself pointed questions about what you did to enhance your worth or visibility last year.

- How many new people did you meet, and how many of them became part of your network?
- Did you join a new association or professional group?
- Talk with a headhunter?

If you're like most executives, it's likely that you made few networking contacts, didn't join a professional group and didn't become known to a headhunter. Like Mr. Smith, you probably spent the months with your head down, trying to please your employer.

But U.S. economic activity is picking up and a new year is starting, making this a good time to recommit yourself to your career. "You need to get out of the mindset of being in survival mode," says Russ Jones, a principal of First Transitions, an Oak Brook, Ill., corporate-outplacement firm. "The economy is going to be better, and people need to lift their heads up and think, 'What can I do for my career?'"

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To help with this process, we asked a panel of employers, recruiters, counselors and human-resources professionals what executives could do to revitalize their professional lives in the next 12 months. By applying their tips, which follow, you'll stand out more to your current employer or other companies. This will make you a better candidate if you need to job hunt in the months ahead.

1. Decide to *feel* differently about your job.

Executives typically set concrete behavioral or operational career goals, such as gaining market share or meeting more clients, says Steven Berglas, a Los Angeles-based clinical psychologist who counsels top managers. Very often, they don't achieve lasting goals or what would really help them -- such as creating rewarding relationships -- because they keep approaching their objectives in the same quantitative way, he says.

A more dynamic way of improving your work life would be to think in emotional terms and deciding to *feel* differently about career goals, he says. For instance, rather than saying you want to improve market share, you could aim to *feel* differently about your customers. This might mean spending time with and learning more about what they want and need. Instead of trying to acquire more networking contacts, you might decide to *feel* more connected to the ones you have. You then would approach your interactions differently and develop more meaningful relationships, he says.

"Executives think in a linear, more-of-the-same mode instead of emotionally," says Dr. Berglas, author of "Reclaiming the Fire: How Successful People Overcome Burnout" (Random House, 2001). "If they would focus on the feeling they want and stick to it, they'll change the tactics they use. This would be a total reorientation for most executives."

To make this change, decide to stop doing more of what you've always done, says Dr. Berglas. Next, ask others for feedback about why you might be stalled or what you could improve. Explore whether you're blaming others for problems in your department instead of examining your managerial style. Try to control others less, observe more and be more approachable, so staff and peers can offer ideas.

"Department staffers often tell me that they'd like to shift campaigns or orientations, but their boss won't let them," says Dr. Berglas. "If C-level executives would focus on feeling things more, they'll change the tactics they use."

2. Be clear on where you want to be.

Visualize where you'd like to be in one, three and five years. This includes the type of job you'd like, where it's located, whom you want to work for and with, and your pay expectations. This way, you'll have a goal in mind and make better choices, says Mark Edwards, chairman of Compensia, a San Jose, Calif., executive-compensation-consulting firm. "You have to know where you want to get to have any real hope of getting there," he says.

Mr. Edwards, a poker player who was a World Poker Tour finalist, also recommends that executives use successful poker strategies on their careers. This includes having a Plan B, or what's called an "out" when a player bluffs in poker. For executives, this means having a backup plan in the event of a layoff or events outside your control, he says.

"When I was working at a company before starting my own, I always knew where I would go if things went sideways and I lost my job," he says. "I would go to another consulting firm or start my own firm. It behooves a person to be in touch with the market."

3. Do an outstanding job in your current position.

The best way to be visible and rise higher in your career is by being passionate about your work and doing it exceptionally well. Executive recruiters always are looking for talented up-and-comers to watch and typically hear about them from friends and colleagues, says Peter Crist, founder and president of Crist Associates, a Hinsdale, Ill., search firm.

"Other people will talk about you, but most executives forget that and don't focus on their efforts all the time," he says. "But being passionate and staying focused is what distinguishes the people I find and follow during their careers."

A friend of Mr. Crist's recently recommended that he meet a rising young executive now heading a business unit at General Electric Co. When Mr. Crist met with her, he was impressed by her intelligence and leadership skills. The two now communicate regularly about her career. "I'm watching this one," he says. "She's going to be a terrific player. I guarantee you that in 10 years, she'll be on the radar screen."

One way to determine if you're doing a sufficiently good job is to review your resume and ask what you did in the past 12 months that you can add to it, says Liz Ryan, a former human-resources manager and founder of WorldWIT, an online networking organization for professional women. "If you can't add anything to your resume or your marketability based on what you've done in the past year, then you're treading water," she says. "Something significant should have happened."

4. Market yourself within your company.

If you're doing an outstanding job and higher ups don't seem to be noticing you, perhaps you aren't talking about yourself enough. Many executives stay mum about their achievements so they won't appear to be bragging, says Nanci Raphael, an executive-development coach in Ambler, Pa.

"People aren't stepping up to the plate and talking about what they've done," she says. "They tell me all the time they expect others to notice what they've done, but you sometimes have to tell them."

It's possible to get the word out about your accomplishments indirectly or without seeming boastful, says Ms. Raphael. One way is to praise a subordinate or your team in an e-mail memo to your boss copied to other managers or during a conference call. Acknowledging their successes raises their visibility and puts the spotlight on you as their manager.

"What happens is that you send the e-mail thanking your team for what it did, and the people you send it to will send it on to others," she says. "Later on, those people will come up to your team and say they heard about the results. It's a fabulous way of raising your profile, especially if you are uncomfortable about doing it directly."

Ms. Raphael says she advised this approach for a new vice president of sales at a large consumer-products company who was on the verge of being demoted. He had developed a new sales territory that was about to generate millions in new revenues but hadn't publicized his achievements to anyone except his boss. Managers higher up who hadn't heard what he was doing began worrying he couldn't handle his responsibilities until he copied them on an e-mail note to his boss about the new territory. "That changed their opinion of him, and he's now considered a key player," she says.

5. Redouble your efforts to develop relationships with new people.

This is just a fancy way of saying you need to network, but far too few executives are taking the time to meet anyone new, says Mr. Jones. Make a commitment to have one lunch and one dinner out monthly, either with a professional organization or with new contacts. "That would give you 24 great opportunities to network next year," he says, adding that most executives he asks go to only three events annually.

Judith von Seldeneck, founder and chairman of Diversified Search Cos., a Philadelphia recruiting firm, suggests being even more active. "I would do a strategic networking call to a person I don't know well at least once a week and arrange to meet with them," she says.

When calling people, mention that you heard about their accomplishments and would like to know more about them and their career, she says. "This would allow you to meet 30 to 40 people a year, but you have to commit to it and make yourself do it," she says.

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