

ADVOCATES, ALLIES AND ADVERSARIES

WHY GREAT WORK ALONE ISN'T
ENOUGH TO SURVIVE AND GET AHEAD

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I get it – you’re good at your job. Or, so you think. You meet deadlines, respond to requests in a timely fashion and people seem to like you. I mean, you’ve been at it a while. So, shouldn’t you be excelling?

The problem is, even after what seems like years of nods, ‘nice work!’ and ‘meets expectations’ ratings – your career is stalled.

It’s frustrating. You’ve put in a lot of time and effort, and wonder if it’s all gone unnoticed. Or, have you just been focused in the wrong areas?

Here’s the thing... working hard, pitching in where needed, being well-liked and committing to your organization all help you get into your first management role. Perhaps even to middle-management. And you were happy to put in extra hours after the kids had gone to bed, clean up a spreadsheet for a colleague or contribute to the wellness committee to do your part.

Now these efforts are no longer differentiators.

The ugly truth is that decisions – especially when it comes to people – are riddled with bias. While some organizations are actively balancing the promotion process (1), for most, promotability is closely connected to who you know, and specifically who’s on your side.

Management training has focused on traditional topics like performance management, but has failed to help you gauge the inner workings of your environment (2), leaving your understanding of power and organizational dynamics as critical, yet underdeveloped skills.

Here’s the tip: you’ve ignored the ‘system’. The system includes the Priorities, Pace, Players and Politics of your organization. In doing so, you’ve missed out on advancement opportunities and even fallen short of fulfilling your current job responsibilities.

To give you the best chance at advancement and career success, you must first understand the relationships you have with decision-makers within your organization. More importantly, you’ve got to find out if they are Advocates, Allies or Adversaries.

We’re going to look at how each of these three kinds of people affect your work and how you can best connect with them to help you move closer toward your career goals.

This isn’t about using others to get where you want. Rather, it’s about evaluating relationships through the lens of strategic career development.

STRATEGIC CAREER DEVELOPMENT - WHO'S ON YOUR SIDE

As the CEO of your career, you're responsible for figuring out how to achieve your professional goals. Knowing what people will help to champion or challenge your successes will help you get closer to those goals.

In sales and marketing, they segment their customers and prospects. We're going to apply the same concept through the lens of strategic career development and stakeholder management, placing key decision-makers into one of three categories: Advocates, Allies and Adversaries.

We'll start by defining each segment (person) and look at strategies to help move more individuals towards those positive relationships. Then, we'll use a practical tool to plot key individuals from your network.

ADVOCATES

Advocates are champions of your work and career. They will support you both privately and publicly as well as provide you the time, interest, and candid feedback to drive your performance and career. Advocates often value the mentorship and coaching process, and take pleasure in seeing you succeed.

On top of offering counsel and advice, an advocate's best offering has to do with protecting others through their own authority and credibility. This approach is sometimes referred to as Air Cover. Air Cover means that, as situations become uncertain or difficult (such as sourcing scapegoats, slashing budgets, or setting unreasonable deadlines), advocates provide the overhead shelter to allow you the focus, space, resources and flexibility to do your work.

Air Cover is also critical when you've made a mistake or when something didn't go as planned – even if outside of your control (e.g., angering a key partner, losing a major client, or watching high potential talent leave for the competition).

Having advocates on your side is clearly precious and advantageous, because in addition to taking an active interest in you, they use their own credibility and influence to protect, support and boost your career. Your advocates hold the line to ensure you get a minimum fair shake, and ideally more space and opportunity.

Advocates also encourage you to lead new initiatives and are quick to enter your name into decision-making circles as opportunities arise. They work formal and informal channels, gaining you the necessary exposure to influence others and drive change.

Advocates also defend your reputation and credibility as needed by again, using theirs. For instance, they will provide vocal support for why you deserve your bonus even if your numbers come up short, or why you should lead the next project even if the previous one wasn't successful.



Remember that while all this support may appear to be purely altruistic, just as mentors learn and gain from their protégés, advocates may also be seeing personal benefit or seek a favour from you in the future. Knowing your advocates' goals and intentions is helpful today and moving forward. That said, advocates offer numerous benefits, so the more you have, the greater chances of landing that next big job.

Working with Advocates ●

Advocates are powerful relationships that should be cherished and never taken for granted. Since advocates are already in your corner, leverage their support in all possible ways. Listen closely to their feedback and suggestions while taking action and make adjustments wherever possible. Ask for their help directly in a variety of areas, and show appreciation for their valued support and guidance – even if it hasn't yet provided immediate returns. Understand how they can help you to gain additional support from others - including your advocates' advocates.

Even if your advocates really like you or what you stand for, like any relationship, it takes effort. Taking active steps to further your advocates' goals and aspirations (pitching in to support an initiative they're leading), and making them look good (offering a well-placed thank you during a presentation) will help to keep the relationship secure.

ALLIES

Allies provide support to you in predictable, safe and confidential settings. However, the biggest difference between advocates and allies is that allies are keen to provide public support only when it aligns to their own priorities and interests. For instance, an ally peer may be keen to back your more efficient work process in front of your shared boss if they are also feeling over-worked or under-resourced. But don't expect him/her to help you go above your boss' head publicly if it feels too risky to them, regardless of their personal stance.

Trusting allies can be challenging if their behaviour is inconsistent and they haven't shared their intentions.

For instance, an executive's initial support for your project can be lost once a new and more interesting project grabs her attention. If you're unaware of the new project, you could be left wondering why her support has dissipated so quickly.

This also goes both ways. If you've shared your support for a peer's project – a potential ally – only to change your mind after new information surfaced, then that action reduces trust and the likelihood of gaining support from this individual in the future. At worst, losing trust creates conflict and puts you in his/her sights for revenge. This sounds harsh and negative – I know – but when individuals feel their status (and livelihood) may be threatened, and their ego gets bruised, remember that (a) people have long memories, and (b) integrity can be quickly redefined and 'appropriate behaviour' skewed to reflect one's version of reality.

All in all, ally relationships can be precarious. But they don't have to be. If built upon mutual respect and pursuing common goals where both parties benefit, allies can be the added support needed to achieve your goals.

Working with Allies ●

Your allies are there for you some of the time, but it would be nice if you could count on their backing more consistently. Get to know what's important to them, openly share what you're trying to achieve (where it's safe to do so) and capitalize on win-win strategies and solutions where you can both gain. Relationships should be reciprocal, so if your ally jumped in to help or stuck his/her neck out in a meeting for you, be ready to do the same to bolster the relationship. Although, if you're the first to give in the relationship, it will promote reciprocity from the receiver (3).

If your approaches are misaligned or in conflict with one another, ask your ally for professional courtesy through honest and transparent conversation. And be prepared to do the same. You don't always have to agree or support one another. But at least you'll know where each other stands – a practice that not only will allow you to maneuver appropriately through different issues and circumstances, but also builds trust.

ADVERSARIES

Adversaries are those who undermine and resist your or your team's plans, work or overall purpose. Adversaries fail to see value in your contributions or responsibilities, view you as an impediment to their goals, or simply dislike you as a person. Fun, right?

In certain environments, their behaviour toward you may be overt, such as publicly ridiculing your work in meetings. But adversaries can also operate more discreetly by

'slow playing', which involves delaying information, rescheduling critical meetings, pushing back deadlines, requesting unnecessary information, making excuses for not delivering and so on. Or, Adversaries interfere, overstep their responsibilities, claim a lack of clarity or ignorance for making decisions, and leave you out of important conversations.

Adversaries rarely, if ever, support your ideas or opportunities that would cast you or your team in a positive light. They use their power and relationships to redirect, block and set back your work. While adversaries can be difficult people who appear to act unethically or without integrity, it's important to identify when the behaviour is directed towards you personally versus towards your position. For instance, a sales manager may not apply your marketing strategy with her customers because she doesn't consider your tactics to be effective and has been told by her boss to 'take an approach that works'. In this case, the sales manager believes she is acting in the best interests of the company, and may have nothing against you personally. She just doesn't see value in your work.

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Similarly, the boundaries of professional competition can easily blur between two executives vying for the CEO role – quickly morphing into personal attacks, produced primarily by the incessant drive for the top job and subsequent tactics to stand out by putting down the other competitor. Their behaviour is more about the position and circumstances than the individual. “It's nothing personal!”, they may claim.

Working with Adversaries ●

On the surface, moving your adversaries to allies or advocates might appear hopeless – especially if it's based on personal conflict. However, often the root of interpersonal conflict is in misunderstandings, unintentional behaviour or outcomes, and ego.

To change these relationships, you first need to get to the bottom of it – even if it's ugly. Moving someone you (and others) perceive as your adversary takes effort, but shifting them to an ally or even possibly an advocate can be worth the effort.

So, how do you do this?

Try breaking bread. Take the person for coffee or lunch, or get outside for a short walk to clear the air. Be upfront about what you want to talk about and why it's important. Allow the individual to say what's on their mind. Listen with the intent to understand, not

to respond. Ask great questions to make sure you truly understand the other person's perspective, and own up to your behaviour, if it's the right thing to do.

In some environments, this type of conversation can open you up to further risk.

But don't be surprised if the relationship shifts – if not immediately within the discussion, but perhaps afterwards. I once had a client we'll call Jane. Jane was angry when held back for a promotion she felt she deserved. Jane blamed her boss and it fractured their relationship. After a restructuring, Jane was assigned to a new leader, but her former manager remained a key decision-maker in the organization. Over time, Jane eventually realized why her boss held her back. She came to appreciate the decision, and mustered up the courage to thank her old boss. This action fundamentally and positively changed their relationship. Jane moved a perceived adversary into an ally, and potentially to an advocate – all because she set her ego aside. Note this was a perceived adversary, as perhaps the old boss was always acting in Jane's best interests by allowing her more time to develop.

Also recognize that those who apply different styles and offer unique perspectives may be annoying, but that doesn't make them adversaries. So don't be too quick to place difficult superiors or coworkers into the bottom segment simply because they're annoying.

If you still can't agree on something or it doesn't resolve the issue with your adversary, then you can at least know you did your part. The effort's outcome also confirms this person may never become a supporter. Now you know.

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Lastly, look to leverage your advocate relationships to improve adversarial ones. Reach out to your advocates who do get along with your adversaries. Informally ask your advocate what makes your adversary tick so you can initiate and improve connection. Your advocate could also help to clear the air or offer renewed perspective.

Here's an example: When the Controller, Eric, inexplicably cut your two new positions and your training budget by one-third, you were angry. You pressed him for an explanation, but didn't get a meeting, let alone a reply email. Ever since, it seems Eric has it out for you.

So, you've stayed clear of him. Fortunately, one of your advocates – Sam, another senior leader from a different department – carpool with Eric. Sam can offer you insight into Eric's style and thinking. Sam could also ask Eric a few harmless questions on your behalf. Armed with new knowledge, you can adjust your approach or potentially put any unfounded issues to rest (i.e. stop looking over your shoulder). Sam might invite you and Eric to morning coffee to help clear the air, and in the process, move a (perceived) adversary to an ally. Advocates want to support you, and this tactic is a great way to improve relationships.

UNKNOWN

Sometimes we haven't had formal opportunities to interact and build relationships with others within the organization. This bonus category is meant for people you do not know well, or at least well enough to list them as an advocate, ally or adversary. By identifying the Unknowns, you then know your next step: begin forging relationships with them and find out who they are, what they're about and what's important to them. Initiate, deepen and maintain. Rinse and repeat.

WHO MAKES YOUR LIST?

Those who are influential AND who hold positional power (i.e. authority) are most important to first assess. They must also be tied to the decision-making process that directly impacts you. For instance, the CEO has both power and influence, but if she's only focused on SVP and not VP positions, it doesn't matter for you.

Influence is the ability to affect decisions, results and daily workings without positional power. Think of those who are extremely well-liked, well-respected and well-connected. Influential individuals can get things done through less formal channels and have a strong understanding of the organization's inner workings. For instance, the Executive Assistant (EA) to the CEO sees all, knows all and can influence all. He is the gatekeeper of access and information, while also having the CEO's and Executive Team's ear. The EA will not approve your promotion, but he can make sure you're on the weekly agenda and even influence the dialogue – both formally and behind the scenes.

Authority represents positions with formal responsibility and accountability for results and decision-making. For instance, the CFO may own spending controls or the CHRO has overall responsibility for programs that drive talent development and engagement. Those in significant roles have legitimate authority and therefore positional power. When the CFO says there's no budget for additional headcount, there's no budget. End of discussion.

How far and wide should you evaluate others in the organization?

Get a good read on who's influential, including your peers. Your direct manager is the most obvious person to first assess, and here's a good rule of thumb: evaluate those near where you want to go, but no higher than two levels up. For instance, if you're a middle-manager working in a 10,000-person organization, it's likely unrealistic to add the CEO to your list (even if you're fortunate to have a relationship with him/her). Whereas the Vice-President and EVP of your functional unit may be of greater utility. That said, if you're a Vice-President in the same environment, you should definitely be evaluating your relationship with the CEO.

Once you've completed your list of names, place each in one of the four categories. For a more in-depth review, add a Low (L), Medium (M) or High (H) rating to represent your confidence of the relationship assessment (not the level of confidence in the relationship).

ADVOCATES	ALLIES	ADVERSARIES	UNKNOWN
John (H) Mohammed (M)	Karissa (H) Ahmed (M)	Eric (H) Jennifer (L) Mia (L)	Yusuf Shelley Kim

Once complete, see where your support lies, and where opportunity exists to move people upward in the list.

ASK YOURSELF:

- Which advocate relationships need nurturing? Where have you recently shown your support?
- Where do gaps and opportunities exist with your allies?
- How can you best connect with your adversaries? Which advocates can help you?

HOW DO YOU CREATE (AND KEEP) MORE ADVOCATES?



Ideally, you want as many advocates as possible. But you're likely going to see a range of people across the categories. You may also need to do some investigating to bolster your confidence of where you stand with each individual. Relying on someone you think is an advocate could prove highly risky. That said, there may be a perceived adversary who would be happy to act as your ally.

It's also important to quickly evaluate:

- Are your adversaries actively working against you, or is that your perceived experience?
- How important is improving adversary relationships to your success (i.e. can you survive and thrive without their support)?
- What is the likelihood of improving adversary relationships? Would your time, energy and resources be better spent on allies and advocates?

SUMMARY

As with any environment, it's important to understand the system at play: the greater environment beyond 'culture and values' that runs the day-to-day-how-things-get-done-around-here of the organization. The more you understand this – including the players, priorities, pace and politics – the greater chance you'll have at successfully navigating the world around you.

Using segmentation as a lens into strategic career can help you determine who has power and influence, and who's on your side.



In closing, here are some key questions for consideration:

- How are you flexing your style and leadership to engage and build relationships with different personalities?
- Have you strategically built a coalition of supporters who can sway the decision-making process? Where should you focus your efforts?
- Are you actively evaluating your organization's system and its decision-makers to know where you stand and where opportunities exist?

Remember that while these tactics will work to put you in the best position possible to achieve your professional goals, they do not guarantee success as there are often many factors outside of our control.

That said, actively evaluating and building your internal network will aid in positioning you for new opportunities and put you on track towards achieving your professional goals.

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Jeff Lucier is the founder of Aspirant Leadership Inc. and believes deeply in the power of leadership.

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Jeff is a Certified HR Leader (CHRL) through the HR Professional Association (HRPA). He earned his Master of Science in Management, a Bachelor of Arts in Psychology, a Post-Grad Certificate in HR Management, and is a Certified Executive Coach (CEC) through Royal Roads University.

With over a decade of experience working as an HR Professional, Executive Coach and Consultant, Jeff has partnered with leaders of all levels across multiple industries.

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