

Focusing On Getting to The Top of The Corporate Ladder Can Do More Harm Than Good

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Contrary to popular belief research shows one is more likely to make it to the top through jumping from ladder to ladder rather than lateral or downward moves across an organisation.

Conventional advice states that for one to succeed they must stay in their lane which entails climbing the corporate ladder and networking in the confines of your industry. Research, however, has shown that developing a small network within one sector or industry has very little to small impact as compared to building a network that spans across industries. The idea of "structural holes" was brought forth by sociologist Ronald Burt, who theorized about opportunities that lie in the gaps between social groups or clusters.

Manoeuvring through structural holes

According to Burt's finding a cluster is a group of people that spend a lot of time together sharing information and ideas. Therefore they tend to share the same line of thinking as information from outside rarely enters. The downside of this is when everyone in the cluster has the same information the contacts are redundant. Burt asserted the large information advantage is found in the gaps between the clusters and those that manoeuvre through the gap are at the biggest advantage. The 'brokers' as he labelled them fill the structural holes and gain control of the flow of information and gain more power than those inside a cluster.

Burt's study showed that individuals who interact with people in other clusters or organizations were significantly more likely to come up with strategic ideas. They also have a greater chance of being promoted and being paid more as a result of their innovation. In a study of 673 managers at an electronics company who ran the supply chain for the entire firm, he asked them for an idea that would improve the supply chain as also who they had discussed the idea with. After looking through the data and comparing the network map he found the brokers- these are the individuals who discussed with people from other clusters were more significantly likely to come up with valuable ideas.

Breaking away from the cluster

In another study conducted by Adam Kleibaum, his findings further supported those ideas brought up by Burt. Kleibaum found that when your career path takes you through different sections in an organisation you are more likely to have a diverse set of relationships than if you go through the same section in an organisation. When you jump from ladder to ladder it is a more effective strategy rather than moving in a lateral or downward movement across an organisation.

In his research, Kleibaum with 30,000 participants, collected three months' worth of emails. He also collected demographic information as well as their salaries, career paths for seven months, business functions, job functions, and locations. What he found was that surprisingly the people who were most likely to do well and progress through the structural holes were the ones he labelled the 'organizational misfits.' These were the people who did not follow the norm in career progression which is slow and steady climbing of the ladder they instead, move through business units and filled different job functions.

Organizational Misfits

These, according to Kleinbaum were the people that bounced from department to department. But they were also the people that built more diverse social networks that in the future enabled them to see more holistically. As a result, their careers moved faster and further than those who stayed within their set lines. They were more likely to get promoted and to get that raise. The organizational misfits became the leaders, the manager, and the bosses.

These findings are vital in that they open up new discussions to the traditional way of climbing the corporate ladder, not only is it important to be dedicated to your work, it is also important to grow your social network. Network with people from different departments, converse with people with different perspectives as it may be those minor differences that push your career forward quicker than expected.

Be more open-minded

Leon Ho eludes when a person's eye is on the ultimate result only- that is to be at the 'highest point' in their career, there is a tendency to neglect important elements such as personal growth, skills development, and cooperation with other people. They fail to realize that these are the essentials for rising high and attaining recognition.

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