

10 Tips for Managing Your Career

BETTINA SEIDMAN,
SEIDBET ASSOCIATES

Get “interpersonally fit” by improving your work relationships and honing your communication skills.

In today’s world, it is as important to be interpersonally fit as it is to be physically fit. You can work at being interpersonally fit by investing in your relationships with people and continually developing your presentation and communication skills. Whether you are working on a team, supervising employees, training and developing staff, interviewing applicants, networking, or trying to improve your relationship with your boss, it will always be important to express yourself clearly, understand others, exchange feedback, resolve conflict, and assert your needs. The following ten tips will help you do this:

1. Develop a self-awareness that takes you where you want to go.
2. Clarify and focus on your goals.
3. Become an employee your organization wants to retain and promote.
4. Think about the strategies and tactics that will help you be more successful in working with others.
5. When you have a complaint, offer a solution or a recommendation, too.
6. Practice good telephone manners.
7. Use performance evaluations as career development opportunities.
8. If you are planning to look for another job or change careers, think about and assemble the tools you will need.
9. Hone your negotiating skills to get what you want.
10. Develop and nurture a professional network.

Develop a self-awareness

It is important to have awareness of self in business — how you are perceived by others, including managers, colleagues, and subordinates.



You might want to use some assessment instruments, especially the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator, which measures personality preferences or styles (extroversion vs. introversion, sensing vs. intuitive, thinking vs. feeling, and judging vs. perceiving). For example, have you ever wondered why someone on your team couldn’t keep quiet or why another person wouldn’t speak up? Some people have a preference for extroversion and others for introversion. This means that they are energized in different ways for the tasks at hand — one group wants to talk things out, while the other wants to reflect in private first. The extroverts want to explore ideas through conversation, processing new information as they go, whereas the introverts don’t really want to voice their opinions until

they thoroughly understand their own position. Put them on a team together and it is easy for one group to misinterpret the other’s motives or behaviors.

Understand your own preferences, and try to become aware of those of your coworkers. Then, use this knowledge as you do your job, work with others on teams, and manage your career to the best of your ability.

Focus on your goals

Identify the outcomes you want to achieve in your current job. What is the situation at work? Do you want to stay in the same department? Are you looking for a raise or a promotion? Are you having problems with your manager, a colleague, or a subordinate? Do you want to leave your company and, if so, what kind of job are you looking for?

The more clearly you can state your goals, the more easily you can develop and implement a plan and achieve

**“If you tell me,
I will listen.
If you show me,
I will see.
If you let me
experience,
I will learn.”**

— Lao Tzu, Chinese philosopher,
6th century B.C.

them. As you think about your goals, evaluate your ability to move forward and identify what’s missing. Skill gaps can exist in technology, education, or management experience.

Choose a profession you love. Assess your values, interests, accomplishments, and skills, and use that information to get a job that you will find satisfying.

Make yourself promotable

Become an employee your company wants to retain and promote. Use your intelligence as if all results depended on you. If you don’t know the answer to a question, know where to find it. Support and make your boss look good in public.

Be aware of organizational structure. Look at the organization chart and understand where you fit, where your department fits, how many people report to your manager, and so on.

Follow trends in your industry. Be one of the first people in your department to read about news regarding your industry or your company. Keep abreast of developments by reading *The Wall Street Journal*, *The New York Times*, *Business Week*, and industry-specific publications — such as *CEP*, of course.

Seek the spotlight you deserve. Identify projects that might benefit from your participation and ask to be assigned to them. Keep track of your successes and make sure that management and other stakeholders are aware of them.

Reach an understanding with your boss about how much time a project should require before undertaking it. As you begin new assignments, check back with your supervisor or team leader periodically to confirm that you are on the right track.

Don’t miss deadlines. If it looks like you’re going to have a problem, negotiate a revised schedule and get help.

Be visible by overworking the first few months in a new position. You’ll be perceived as a hard worker for much longer than that.

Work well with others

Think about the strategies and tactics that would help you be more successful in working with other people.

Try to be flexible. Think about your reaction to change. How do you deal with change in your personal life and in your professional life? This is very important in today’s marketplace, because we are living in a climate of change.

Evaluate the input of others on a project and give praise where praise is due. Be sure to give recognition to those who deserve it.

Know how to accept constructive criticism. Unless a comment stems from a misunderstanding, swallow the urge to justify yourself.

Try to understand what is motivating the person on the other side of an argument or discussion.

When you are going to be out of the office, tell your manager and your assistant where you will be and when you will be back.

Return telephone calls and e-mail messages promptly.

Don’t just complain, do something

Nobody likes a complainer. But everybody likes employees with good ideas. It is important to be thought of as “positive.”

So, if you see a problem, think it through and try to find a solution as well.

Always offer a new idea, a recommendation, or a suggestion when you talk to your manager or another department head about a problem.

Use the telephone effectively

Before you make a business call, jot down a few notes, or “talking points.” Prepare to be concise. Give just enough detail, but not too much, and leave only one phone number (if appropriate).

When you dial the phone, you don’t know if you will reach the person you want, reach a coworker, or get voice-mail. It is important to be prepared for all three possibilities.

If you reach the individual with whom you want to speak, be courteous and ask, “Is this a good time to talk for a couple of minutes?”

If you reach a coworker, just leave your name and phone number, and ask what would be a good time for you to call back. There’s no need to tell a long story. However, it is often helpful if you give some indication of the reason for your call so the person you’re calling can prepare for the conversation.

Anticipate reaching voice-mail, and be prepared to “charm” the machine the same way you would a person. The opportunity to leave a recorded message can help you get your point across. Be brief and to the point. If you leave two or three messages that are not returned, the next time you call, say when you will call again — this may create a psychological obligation for the person to call you back. During the workday, instead of leaving a voice-mail message, you can try dialing “0” to reach an operator, who may be able to tell you if the individual is in and when he or she might be reached.

If you have trouble reaching somebody, try calling before 8:00 a.m. Some managers and professionals like to come in early to take advantage of the quiet period before most of the staff arrives.

Prepare for performance evaluations

A good performance evaluation process is based on developing staff, not “hitting people over the head” because of their mistakes. So, focus on the developmental purpose of the meeting.

Get a copy of the evaluation form in advance if you can. Understand the deliverables on which you will be rated, rate yourself, and think about how your manager will rate you.

Use your errors or mistakes as opportunities. Ask “How could I do this differently next time?” or “What can I learn from this?”

Lay out a development plan for the next year that includes specific goals and strategies for achieving those goals.

Assemble a job-search toolbox

If you are planning to look for another job or change careers, think about the tools you will need.

Clearly identify your goals in terms of job title, location, and niche. Do you want to work in a large, medium, or small organization? An established firm or a startup? Public or private?

Understand your job market in terms of who the players are, company cultures, advancement opportunities, appropriate employment agencies or headhunters, salary ranges, and so on.

Identify any gaps in your background that would hold you back from obtaining the job you want. These could include technical skills, communication or presentation skills, certifications, education, and the like.

Develop a marketing-oriented resumé. First, identify your goal. Think about the job you are interested in and pretend you are the hiring manager trying to find the right candidate. What would be the specifications used for the search? What skills, abilities, and experience would you look for in an ideal candidate? You can use your resumé to demonstrate that you meet those criteria.

Get your resumé ready for the Web. Determine what key words or phrases must be in your resumé and cover letter in case the company or search firm relies on computer screening.

Write creative letters — cover letters in answer to advertisements, target letters to companies where you want to work, networking letters before you call for a meeting, and follow-up letters after an interview or networking meeting.

Prepare a list of references. Include the name, title, company, and contact information for four to six people who would vouch for your abilities. If a former manager or colleague now works somewhere else, give his or her previous position and current contact information. Let your references know when you're applying for a new position, and who might be contacting them for a reference. Don't bother with written references, which tend to read like a eulogy; if a former manager offers you a written reference, take it and say thank you, then put it in a bottom drawer.

Hone your negotiation skills

You can almost always get more if you know how to negotiate. Think of yourself as the CEO of your life and your career, and always take a proactive approach to get what you want.

When negotiating the terms of a new job, know what there is to talk about — base salary, incentives, signing bonus, benefits, perks, and training and development (*e.g.*, tuition reimbursement, conferences, and seminars). Know the competition and the salaries they pay. Read everything you can about the company and the industry, and research “wow” employers in the field.

Let the other party go first. This is a classic technique of negotiating. Don't reveal what you want; rather, get them to make the first offer, and then buy some time.

A good line to use (if you need it) is “I am very pleased to have a chance to join your company, but your offer was substantially below my expectations.”

Work your network

Whether you are planning to grow and develop within your present job and company or to look for a new job, networking is an immeasurably valuable professional tool.

While you continue to work in the same job, it is important to know about policies and trends, both internal and external. This information can come from coworkers in your organization, as well as from outside professional contacts.

Identify, join, and become active in one or more professional organizations. Take time to read newsletters and attend meetings. Volunteer to serve on a committee or as an officer. Present papers and speak at conferences.

Keep in touch with former colleagues and managers. Call them occasionally for guidance or just to say hello. Send holiday or birthday cards. Share copies of interesting articles. Advise them of meetings, conferences, or workshops you plan to attend.

Identify a mentor, someone without an agenda, someone you can trust either inside or outside your company. This could be a manager, an older colleague, a former supervisor, or a career coach.

Always carry your business cards with you everywhere you go. You never know when a networking opportunity will appear.

When you do want to look for a new job, you will already have established a very important part of your network.

Maintain a work/life balance

Nobody was ever quoted on their deathbed as saying, “I wish I'd spent more time at the office.” Always make time for family, for fun, for exercise, for personal interests. If you don't take care of yourself, really take care of yourself — who will? CEP

B. SEIDMAN is a career management coach in private practice in New York City (E-mail: seidbet@aol.com). She has more than 25 years' experience in career consulting and human resources management. She founded SEIDBET Associates in 1990 and also works as a Senior Outplacement Consultant at The Ayers Group. She holds an MBA in industrial psychology from Baruch College and a BA in psychology from Brooklyn College, as well as a certificate in labor relations from Cornell's New York State School of Industrial and Labor Relations (NYSSILR). She is a board member of the New York Chapter of the International Association of Career Management Professionals.