

How to Break Through a Career Impasse

Many of the successful managers and professionals who come back to business school at mid-career are looking for more than honing their leadership skills. Many are stuck in their careers. They're looking for direction and support for the changes they long to make in the near future. But, their networks just keep dragging them back to the past—and they don't even realize it.

One class discussion that gets the light-bulbs flashing is a case study analysis of a brilliant functional expert, Harris (not his real name), who gets sent to an elite business school's general management program with the promise of a promotion into a P&L role upon his return. But the move never materializes and Harris is stuck: bored out of his mind in a job he can do "in his sleep," loyal to a company and mentor that have given him much opportunity, and unable to realize that he is simply too useful to his bosses right where he is. Increasingly frustrated, he does more of the same: putting even more time into delivering beyond expectations and lining up more advisers internally.

At first my students are tough on Harris. They see him as insecure, risk-averse and passive. He should negotiate harder or leave. There was no headhunter on the way with the perfect exit on a silver platter. He should know himself better; all his introspection was getting him nowhere.

What broke the impasse? Against his natural inclinations, the introverted Harris eventually focused his energies on building relationships "outside the house," to gain perspective on the trends shaping his industry, to broaden his horizons on possible career options, to meet people like him who managed to make the transition out of a highly specialized domain, and, eventually, to see himself in a different capacity—and to realize that his mentors might never grow past an outdated view of what he might contribute.

Most of the "Harris" I meet have great and large operational networks consisting of mostly internal contacts. They find these networks very useful for exchanging job-related information, getting things done within their role as historically defined, and finding good people to staff their teams. But, these kinds of operational networks also keep people stuck where they are: they stop short of preparing people for a different, future role because they do not reach outside the domain the person is trying to

grow beyond.

What do you do if you find yourself, as many of my students, in this kind of situation? Work to increase your "out-sight:" your insight into the world outside the box that is constraining you. Develop relationships outside your group, sector and even industry. Seek outside expertise. Work on understanding the "office politics" of moving into the senior ranks. Find ways to get to know people at least two levels above, and often, in a different unit or area—even when it feels instrumental. Get involved in and contribute to key initiatives that provide excuses to meet them. Work on raising your profile, not just on continuing to do good work. Get visibility externally. Use what you learn outside to connect to different people within and to add value beyond operational delivery. Understand that what is important to those with control over your fate is different than what you might be delivering. Figure out your market value. Find kindred spirits.

Your network is a mirror of yourself; pay attention to what it reflects. If you want to make a change, make your network future-facing.

The bad news is that you will need to make networking a priority and we all have limited time. The good news is that once you get started, say with a couple of lunches with former colleagues or schoolmates, it's like running. You only crave more.

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