

To climb higher, keep your head up

By Ben Ochs

We've all seen the 50-something first-level manager who wonders why the corner office eludes him. He even harbors a little resentment that he isn't pursued, his talents recognized and rewarded with significant advances. He holds special disdain for the 30-something director who is being considered for "his" vice president job. After all, she hasn't been here half as long as he has – and she already earns more! The injustice of it all makes him wonder why he even shows up in the morning.

The main difference between our two characters is an issue of working heads up vs. working heads down. When our 50-something man got to the company, he was 20-something. He had more hair, less midsection and a Baby Boomer's view on work and career. He was oriented to his role by his new boss, given the guidelines within which he would work, introduced to those with whom he was to work and familiarized with the goals he was responsible for reaching.

He threw himself into his work, spent long hours and was found competent according to his job description. He's been doing the same thing ever since -- keeping his head down, his nose clean, working hard and staying out of trouble.

She, on the other hand, took the pulse of the company culture. She made a point of meeting people on the periphery of those with whom she was to work. She asked for help from others to better understand how they did things around there and offered to help where she could. When she learned of projects people were avoiding, she found a way to help without trying to take over. Her e-mails and hard-copy correspondence opened and closed diplomatically, providing context for the content.

Soon she was being asked to join cross-functional teams to meet stretch goals for the company. Every time she participated, she gained new experience and learned more about how the company managed its people, budget, products and customers. Her insights gave her the ability to recommend creative solutions to problems each time she joined a new team. She became a problem-solver and go-to person for innovative ideas.

Without ever blowing her own horn or asking for recognition, she was soon very well known. People sought her out because she presented more solutions than problems and she did it without being a know-it-all. She regularly got leadership roles, both formal and informal. Often, she was chosen by her own teammates. Her performance consistently exceeded expectations and formal promotions came quickly until she was named director.

From the start, he and she were different in a fundamental way: He was heads down. She was heads up. She scanned the horizon and absorbed her surroundings. He blocked everything except the details of his work. She took risks. He avoided them. She took the time to be personable and diplomatic. He stuck to the facts.

Both did good work and made few errors, but they were valued very differently. He was like a high-quality tool that was reliable, consistent, durable and dependable. There were no surprises. He could be counted on to do what he did without deviation. She did things tools can't do. She tuned in to her surroundings. She found ways to add value beyond her label.

They had similar personalities. Neither was extroverted. They both enjoyed a good book. They didn't seek attention gratuitously. Neither liked to speak before groups, but she prepared and gave it her best shot. He made every effort to avoid it.

Being heads up means staying in touch with the business and the people. As you look toward the executive offices, find ways to be fully part of where you are now and make life easier for everyone around you. The right people will notice.

Ben Ochs works with companies to improve the leadership skills of their executives and high-potential managers. He can be reached at bochs@palmeau.com.