

# 10 MAKE-OR-BREAK CAREER MOMENTS

Navigate, Negotiate, and  
Communicate for Success

Casey Hawley

A stylized sun graphic is positioned in the lower half of the page. It features a semi-circle at the bottom with two concentric arcs above it, and several sharp, triangular rays extending upwards and outwards from the top edge. The sun is rendered in shades of orange and yellow, matching the background.

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Navigate, Negotiate, AND  
Communicate FOR Success

CASEY HAWLEY

  
TEN SPEED PRESS  
Berkeley

## Dedication

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*To my prayer partners who have implored God that I would not always say the first thing that comes to my mind and who have been successful most of the time, at least when I would listen. Special thanks to Frances Pastore, Mary Thomas, Belinda Stone, Ann Kieffer, Caroline Long, Joyce Johnson, Angela Mitchell, Teresa Gernatt, Carolyn Caswell, Sandra Robinson, Chris Reynolds, Cathy Russo, Joan Holsenbeck, Sharon Powell, Ginny Scruggs, and Debbie Howell. They have worn out their knees in prayer for me as I have learned the lessons I pass along in this book. Thank you.*

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# INTRODUCTION

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There is a secret handshake in business. There are codes and passwords that allow some people to pass on to higher levels. Not knowing these door openers can hold you, as a professional, back from the career you deserve, no matter how smart you are.

The real challenge is that the secrets you need to know are not called passwords or handshakes; they are far more subtle than that. The secrets that can advance your career are the unwritten rules, regulations, and nuances of what to do, what to say, and how to approach situations that pop up along your career path. What do you say when you unexpectedly find yourself side by side with an executive who can offer you a job or promotion in your company? How do you meet a new committee or team and communicate with its members in a way that makes them embrace your ideas from the very start? What is the best way to handle that job interview? How do you accept awards, honors, and promotions in a way that wins the affirmation of your peers and not their jealousy? What do you say when you suddenly find yourself in a conflict with a coworker? And perhaps most important, how do you ask for a raise?

*10 Make-or-Break Career Moments* defines these door-opening moments and shows you how to navigate them triumphantly. In this book, you will find strategies for fluidly and confidently responding to these critical moments that can make your path to success faster and easier. Not following these strategies can mean taking unnecessary detours along the way—and delaying your success. You could miss out on that all-important job opportunity or fail to be asked to be part of an influential team or focus group in your company. You might miss the opportunity to impress an executive who could offer you a role in a new project or offer you a great job recommendation. You might even appear less savvy, professional, and mature than you really are—and you don't want to misrepresent yourself that way. Communicating effectively in these crossroads moments will ensure that you leave a positive and powerful impression on all you encounter.

Nothing alters your path to success like the right communication. The right word said at the right time can propel your career forward; conversely, careless words blurted out in one of those ten critical moments can damage an influential person's view of you forever.

The one common thread that will run through your entire career is that your communication will always be the chief tool with which you will reach your goals: better jobs, great teamwork with colleagues, and effectiveness with the people you manage. You will be continually honing your communication at every level, becoming more polished and professional in choosing your words. This book is a fast-track tool to prepare you right now for the most important moments in your career.

The ten particular moments focused on in this book were chosen based on consultation and interviews with hundreds of professionals in all industries, small businesses, nonprofits, education, government, and even places of worship. In every type of employment, communication was valued as an indicator of how successful an employee would be. The

ten moments are universal and highly important to the employee's success, whether you measure success by salary, position, career satisfaction, or your impact on other people.

You will probably experience all ten moments: certainly all that relate to the job search process, conflicts with others, awards and recognition, as well as being fired or resigning. These moments are career-changers—altering your circumstances and probably your income for better or worse, depending on how you respond to what is going on in that moment. Every situation is different, but this book allows you to discover what other people have found to be successful in similar moments. Based on my experience as a consultant for more than twenty years, I have distilled each great idea into practical suggestions. Finally, this book is a great primer for those who can only think of the right thing to say after the fact when opportunities have passed them by, and they are left with regrets for what might have been. With the help of these proven strategies, you can be the person who says the right thing at the right time.

## THE FIRST MOMENT YOU MEET AN EXECUTIVE OR OTHER KEY BUSINESS CONTACT

Who in a company receives the least positive feedback of anyone in the organization? The janitor? No. The CEO. The higher up you go in an organization, the fewer “attaboy” and acknowledgments you receive on a daily basis. Although managers and supervisors are generally conscientious about giving hourly workers and lower-level professionals positive feedback for a job well done, no one feels it is necessary to do that for the executives. Those who get this kind of feedback generally respond very well to it; why, then, don’t we offer our higher-ups the same strokes?

Executives listen to information all day and deal with problems. Positive communication is in short supply some days. When executives are at social functions or even company receptions, they, like anyone else, would welcome hearing about what’s going *right*—interesting observations, and breaking news from the community and their industry. When you realize this, you’ve got the basis for a model of what to talk about when you suddenly find yourself standing beside an executive at a company function or at an industry conference.

There you are, standing by the coffee urn or the cash bar, and suddenly you realize that the person standing next to you is a vice president from your company. Should you take the coward’s way out? Tell yourself that he does not want to talk to someone of your low status and quietly edge away? Not if you are trying to advance your career. For all you know the executive would welcome someone new to talk to and may be trying to avoid the same old crowd he hears from all the time. You could be just the person who will turn a tedious night into a refreshing experience for him.

Sometimes, when professionals are put on the spot to converse with an executive, they become desperate to say something—*anything*. Big mistake. An inexperienced conversationalist may say something that comes out as critical or shallow. Your response to the opportunity to make a great impression becomes pretty unimpressive.

So what can you actually say? Think M.I.S.S.I.O.N. possible! The M.I.S.S.I.O.N. model is a method to help you come up with timely conversation starters that will save you from just standing there with that deer-in-the-headlights look on your face as you struggle to come up with something to say. More important, it will guide you to positive topics, so you will have no regrets. A conversation with an executive is a wonderful opportunity for revealing who you are and the intelligence and creativity you can bring to her organization. The M.I.S.S.I.O.N. model helps ensure you make good use of that opportunity. You want to make sure that the meeting with you is memorable to the executive—in a good way. M.I.S.S.I.O.N.



is a mnemonic—a memory aid consisting of letters that stand for key words. In this case, the letters will help you remember the following topics you can use to have a successful conversation with an executive:

### THE M.I.S.S.I.O.N. MODEL

**M** = Milestones in projects

**I** = Individual contributions and experiences

**S** = Speeches, events, and articles that connect you

**S** = Self—as in *be yourself*

**I** = Interesting nuggets

**O** = Opportunities

**N** = Neighborly talk

#### **M = Milestones in projects**

Everyone congratulates the boss at the finish of a project. But you will be the exceptional person if you notice and comment on milestones along the way. A milestone is one step of many that must be accomplished between the beginning and the end of a successful project. Making a positive comment about a milestone that has been achieved on a long-term project says many complimentary things about you. First of all, it says that you noticed; therefore, you are observant, unique, and perceptive, and you care about the company. It also says you are refreshingly different from all those who *haven't* mentioned it. You're the thoughtful one who's brought up this mini-success in a conversation.

Milestone events vary according to what your company is trying to achieve in any particular year. For example, if a company is trying to launch the sale of a new drug, some milestone events might include these:

- Passing initial in-house testing
- Gaining FDA approval
- Determining a name for the product
- Completing the marketing plan

After the launch, an executive will be hearing from everyone. Be among the handful who appreciates the significance of small successes along the way.

Here's another example: the establishment of a new subsidiary or branch or even relocation of your company. The following are likely milestone events for such an opening:

- Selection of a site
- Board approval to move forward

- Groundbreaking
- 

- Selection of an architect or builder
- Publication of related news articles

Ken Blanchard has had an extraordinarily successful career as a business author, motivational speaker, and thought leader. Much of his work, especially the bestseller *On the Minute Manager*, is based on the quest to “catch people doing something right.” His premise is that it takes no ingenuity to see and comment on what is going wrong. The extraordinary individual will hone the ability to comment on the things that are going right. In a world of “picture straighteners,” the employee who can ignore the obvious complaints and criticisms and instead offer intelligent observations about things that are going well, will shoot to the top. Such an employee will stand out from the crowd and be listened to by people at all levels of the organization.

### **I = Individual contributions and experiences**

Denver resident Joe Ratway of Performance Advantage tells about an encounter with one of his personal heroes, Federico Peña, former secretary of transportation and former mayor of Denver. Joe happened to be on an escalator traveling parallel to the escalator Peña and his wife were on in the Denver airport constructed during Peña’s time as mayor. Joe leaned across the handrails and, with a sweeping gesture to the magnificent airport, said, “Mr. Secretary, I just want to thank you for the legacy you gave me and all the citizens of Denver.” Peña waited for Joe at the bottom of the escalator, introduced him to his wife, and engaged him in conversation. This conversation would never have taken place if Joe had not been presumptuous enough to speak up.

All of us like to be acknowledged for our individual contributions and experiences. Many executives have pretty healthy egos and respond well to concrete acknowledgment of specific accomplishments. For example, if you meet an executive who has recently been named chair of the local chamber of commerce, congratulate him. If you don’t overdo the compliment, this will come across not as self-serving flattery but as simply good manners. It’s always appropriate to congratulate executives who have recently been acknowledged in ways such as these:

- Elected to an office in any organization or charity
- Selected to serve on a board
- Given a noteworthy honor or award, like “Businessperson of the Year”
- Promoted within your company
- Invited to speak at a visible industry or community event

Here are some other accomplishments you could acknowledge:

- A successful campaign to get legislation passed or ordinances changed that benefited

- An industry award or recognition
- Implementation of a program that the executive has always shown an interest in, such as a mentoring program or a technology change
- An award or recognition for the executive's company

When you mention an individual's contributions, it's critical to have something positive to say that is also specific and not just general fawning. Make it a practice to read about your company, your industry, and influential people in both areas. Read all of your company's newsletters, magazines, and prominent website articles. Read at least one trade magazine monthly. Also read one general business publication like the *Wall Street Journal* or a business magazine. If you read these on a regular basis, you will never be without something of value to contribute to an unexpected conversation.

Warren Buffett, legendary investor and CEO of Berkshire Hathaway, agrees that reading is the strategy to employ for success in communicating with business people—according to the independent Harvard weekly *Harbus*, in the article “My Pilgrimage to Omaha: The Great Warren Buffett Shares Personal Insights, Advice with Eager Group of HBSers” (January 2, 2006).

When asked for his advice to graduating MBA students, Buffett, who plays bridge with Bill Gates and poker with Alan Greenspan, said, “Read, read, read.” He credits reading with not only the start of his career but also his current successes. Early in his career he would read the bound version of *Moody's* page by page, looking for undervalued companies. Today he is more likely to be reading the Korean *Standard & Poor's*, but the principle remains the same: read to look for opportunities in business.

If you handle your own accomplishments and goals tactfully and not boastfully, these can be conversation topics as well. No one likes a braggart, but we do like people who take joy and pride in their work. Do not hesitate to share your enthusiasm for company successes in which you played a part. Mention your contribution, but be sure to praise the company or department and not yourself. The following are examples of comments you could make to share a moment of success with an executive:

- “You know the SR-5 bill you recently helped get passed in the legislature? I was part of the team that did the market research on that. Congratulations.”
- “I saw the new sales script you gave us for telephoning potential new customers in our community. I want to tell you that I think the new model will help us win more mid-size businesses. Even though we have only a three-person sales team at this point, I am very proud that I led the team in sales last year. I think I can sell even more using the new model.”
- “I wanted to thank you for calling the president of Logitech for us. All of us who worked on that sale were excited about winning that account, and I think your call made a difference.”
- “Did you see that our team in accounting received an A+ rating from the auditor?”

That should help us next year when we file our Sarbanes-Oxley report.”

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- “Do you remember when you asked all teachers who sponsor a team of extracurricular activity to trim their budgets by 10 percent this year? I just wanted to let you know that we will exceed that. We have been taking a hard look at some things, and I think we may actually trim our budget by 13 percent. It helped to have a target.”
- “I know you were very active in the Cobb County Chapter of the American Institute of Banking early in your career. I was just elected treasurer. Any advice?”
- “On the Augusta Newsprint project, did you know that every member of our implementation team participated in making the recommendations the client liked so much? It was really one of the best collaborations I have ever been a part of; I learned a great deal about teamwork, and you can’t argue with the results.”

Don’t mention how many hours you worked or that you did not finish some nights until 3:00 A.M.; there is nothing impressive about drudgery, and you will sound as if you are whining. Just show your joy in a job well done and give credit to the executive, the team, the company, and finally yourself. Show you have a stake in the company by taking pride in its successes and recognitions. Don’t brag, but demonstrate that you were a fully engaged part of the team that brought a project to a successful conclusion.

*Donald Trump recently met an audience member as he prepared to tell his rise-and-fall story at the Real Estate and Wealth Expo in Atlanta, Georgia. He pointed to a casually dressed person in the front and asked him if he knew the story. The person said he did, so Trump told him, “Tell the story.” Unknowingly, Trump invited a motivational speaker onstage. In that moment, Orrin Hudson “was hired.”*

*Anyone having watched the popular show The Apprentice understands how tough Donald Trump can be as a thriving businessperson. In the Apprentice reality show, he gives two opposing groups a challenging task and watches them over the course of the project. At the end of each show, he grills each team on their performances and ultimately decides who continues on the show. For those who do not make it, Trump utters the blunt words, “You’re fired!”*

*The passion that Trump has about being successful is similar to the message Hudson routinely relays to kids. Naturally, Trump was impressed with Hudson’s delivery and promised to call him. With the crowd buzzing, Hudson told The Chess Drum that streams of attendees came forth to praise him on his impromptu presentation. Perhaps most in the audience were not familiar with the Hudson story. However, Hudson’s story is fairly well-known. His numerous interviews and articles have been featured on major TV stations, newspapers and websites (more than a dozen on The Chess Drum).*

*Most recently Hudson was the subject of an article on the front of the Lifestyle section in the March 4th [2007] edition of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution. The story highlighted the efforts Hudson has made in the lives of youth, including that of Aaron Porter, a 6’5” eighteen-year-old who had incurred serious charges of juvenile misconduct (including an attempted murder of his father). Porter met Hudson and received enough inspiration and coaching that he won the first annual Georgia Association for Alternative Education (GAEE) state-wide chess championship.*

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## **S = Speeches, events, and articles that connect you**

If there are truly six degrees of separation between each of us and every other person on the earth, then there should be only a few degrees between you and any executive you meet. After all, you are both in business and success oriented. The obvious connection between you and the executive in front of you may be surprisingly easy to talk about: it is the event or speech you are attending. What brings the executive there? What brings you there? Are there commonalities?

**SPEECHES.** If a speech or presentation was made, a great topic of conversation is to pick out a specific point the speaker made and discuss that with the executive. If you make a generalization like “Good speech” or ask a generic question like “What did you think about the speech?” you may actually be putting the executive on the spot. Plus, it comes across as rather unimpressive to make a comment that reflects no discernment or thoughtful observation on your part. You are in no way demonstrating your intelligence or industry knowledge with such a statement.

Instead, choose a noncontroversial but interesting point the speaker made and discuss that with the executive. Don’t put the executive on the spot by asking about a divisive issue, or she may make her excuse to get away at the first opportunity. You should offer a thoughtful observation first and then open up the discussion for the executive to contribute. Here are some examples:

- “I thought her comparison of changes in our industry to the changes in the banking industry in the eighties was interesting. What was your take on that?”
- “She made a strong case for departmental branding. I am still undecided about the value, though. What is your perspective on that?”
- “I thought the strongest point in his argument was the long-term cost containment. You have a much broader perspective on that. What do you think?”

**EVENTS.** When you meet an executive for the first time, look at the context of the encounter. Is it a conference, a meeting of a professional association, a social reception, or a departmental meeting? The context itself is common ground for you and the executive. Find a conversation topic that relates to the event. The [table](#) lists some suggestions.

**ARTICLES.** Executives may show up in print in a variety of ways. They are often quoted in newspapers, magazines, newsletters, and books. Some of them write for industry publications or professional journals. Do a search and find out whether the executive you want to talk with has been mentioned in print. The business librarian at your local university is the best choice to help you—and probably won’t care whether or not you are enrolled. (Your local librarian is a good second choice for a resource.) If you plan to casually mention an article that features the executive’s name, be sure it is a positive article. You don’t want to bring up an article that is a sore spot with the executive.

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| IF THE EVENT IS A ...            | YOU MIGHT TALK ABOUT ...  |
|----------------------------------|---|
| Conference                       | The conference topic, specific speaker, the executive's topic or field  |
| Convention                       | Hot trends in the industry, companies who have a strong presence, vendors who have impressive booths, interesting and relevant people you have met at the convention and specific industry-related comments made  |
| Professional association meeting | Regulatory changes, legislation that may affect your profession, offices the executive has held in the organization and questions about that experience, advice on higher education or certifications and their value to your career  |
| Departmental meeting             | The reason for the executive's being at the meeting, his expertise, how to learn more about the topic of the meeting, offering to supply information or to follow up on something the executive expresses interest in, the history of the executive's relationship with the department or with the department head ("How long have you known Barry Steiner?" "Have Barry and you worked together in the past?") |

Be sure you thoroughly read any article the executive has written. Prepare two "softball but intriguing questions. These questions should be easy enough that you won't risk embarrassing the executive but still thoughtful enough to reveal your own intelligence. Softball questions will not put the executive on the spot by asking him to answer controversial questions or asking for such fine detail that you force the executive to say, "I don't know."

Bring the questions up in a casual way, for example:

- "I see in the *Journal* that you were quoted as saying you think housing starts will pick up in the spring. Do you continue to be encouraged?"
- "That was an interesting article about you in the *Journal* last week. I didn't realize that you had spent time in Australia. When were you there?"

- “Those statistics you quoted in the *Journal* last week were impressive. Did our research department come up with that 23 percent figure, or is that an industry projection?”

Whether you are going to attend a conference, a departmental meeting, or a 10K race, the one thing you must do is prepare to make a memorable and positive impression. You want the executive to return to the office next week and say, “I met a pretty impressive up-and-comer last week. Let’s keep our eye on this one for the future.”

How do you prepare to rock the executive’s world? Before you attend an event, take the following steps:

- Study the agenda and descriptions of any speakers or events. Know what you will be doing, including your schedule and objectives, from the moment you arrive. You will appear savvy and collected.
- Google the leaders who will be there—especially those you hope to impress. Executives don’t like for you to waste their time, so be knowledgeable about who they are and what their current interests are before you go. Use every possible avenue to learn about them: ask their employees about them or people who know them from any area of their lives.

I interviewed an executive with Morgan Stanley who insists that it’s not what you say but knowing whom to say it to. He attributes much of his success to a sponsor or mentor who gave him great advice about how to talk with people with the power to hire or promote him. His sponsor was committed to selling him internally, and the aspiring executive saw his own job as making it easy for the sponsor to do that by following his advice. Now that he himself is finally an executive, he says he finds it really amusing that when people meet with him, sometimes he can tell that they have been coached; someone has told them, “Here is what the director will want to talk about and here are the questions you should be prepared to answer.” He rather likes it. He compares the prepared people favorably to the people who are not even familiar with him or what his company does. The executive’s final advice: “Find someone in the organization who knows who is who and let that person advise you. Then listen.”

- Be familiar with the hottest topic that will probably be discussed at the event. If it is a conference on a specific topic, familiarize yourself with it a bit by researching through the EBSCO online research database or other online tools. Or, if there is breaking news in your industry, go to news websites—try the major networks and news services such as CNN.com or Fox.com—so you will have something to offer when you get into a conversation with your executive idol.
- Just before entering the event, focus—not on yourself, but on the information you have and on the other attendees. By all means do not focus on yourself (for example, thinking only of what you are going to say, how you look, or the way you may come across); that leads to feeling nervous, and then you risk coming across as scatterbrained and boorish. Go into an event with the intent to find someone

fascinating, no matter how hard that may seem. Listen intently and scout for something of interest or value to respond to.

- Don't be task oriented, thinking only of the tasks you want to accomplish in the moments. Professionals move beyond tasks and are open to surprising or being surprised by others. Be a sponge, ready to soak up ideas and people. Don't see everything through the lens of your own job and your department. Try to view the company the way the executive does: with a macro, not a micro, view. That means thinking about your company as it relates to the industry, the community, and legislative bodies. However, be prepared to come down from that high perspective and answer specific questions about your job. You may be just the person to offer some answers the executive really wants to know.
- In most cases, keep the conversation light. Managers and executives go to these events to be informed but also to have some fun and enjoy getting out of the office. If you trap your contact into a deadly dull conversation and question her as if she's defending a dissertation, she will not enjoy meeting you and will certainly plan not to meet you again. And if you run into an executive at your neighbor's housewarming, remember that she deserves a night off. Don't make it all about work.

If, however, you know the executive's company is about to launch a corporate blog, there's nothing that says you can't bring up blogging and see where the conversation leads. If she bites, you might mention blogs you have read that relate to her industry. Or you might point out innovative techniques and applications of blogging so that she becomes interested in what you have to say. She may even want to continue the conversation the following week, in her office or over lunch.

- If you work in the same company but the executive doesn't know you, be sure to introduce yourself and tell the executive which department you work in. Also mention any interesting or high-profile projects you are a part of. Being interested in your work is a winning quality; it makes you more interesting. Just the fact you work in the same company will probably be all that is needed to start the conversation.
- Be sure to connect if you work for different companies but in the same or related fields. For example, you could say, "Hello, Arnold; I understand you are in marketing for Coke; I am in marketing at a midsize local firm." If he responds, you might want to offer that you are in brand management and ask whether that is part of his department, or you might mention a recent marketing coup Coke has accomplished.

### **S = Self—as in *be yourself***

The one piece of advice that almost every executive gives regarding meeting and talking to executives is this: be yourself. This, they all agree, is the foundation for making a good first impression. Today there are many words for this quality—authenticity, transparency, ethical clarity—but they all mean the same thing. Don't try to appear more intelligent or experienced or knowledgeable than you actually are—just be yourself. The pursuit of knowledge is good and preparing and studying for events will pay off, but don't try to put a veneer over who you really are. Surprisingly, many executives like the idea that the job seeker or les



experienced professional is something of a blank slate, and they don't mind sharing the stories of success and bits of advice. And executives have had years of experience recognizing phonies and shams. "Fake it till you make it" will not work here; these discerning executives will see through you in about two minutes. But executives find it very winsome when a less-experienced person is honest about where she is in her career and asks for insight and wisdom.

Kevin Fletcher, vice president of community and economic development for Georgia Power, says this:

*Don't try to be something you are not. Sometimes I speak on college campuses and business students come up to me with a corporate air and try to show me what savvy businesspeople they already are. They often try to sound as if they are highly experienced. I know where they are in their careers, and I know they don't have the experience. It would be much better to just tell me honestly a little bit about themselves and their lives thus far. I am genuinely interested in talking to people like that and find myself enjoying their company. These are the people who make a good impression on me.*

## **I = Interesting**

Executives are just regular human beings, interested in many of the same things that interest other people. The same skills that will make you an interesting conversationalist in other areas of your life will make you interesting in conversations with executives. Don't limit your conversations to just your company or the executive's area of the company. They hear about that all day long. Be up on the most current news in general business, and extend your interest to global business.

The conventional wisdom is for sales representatives to study the company website of the executive they are calling on. One of the most successful sales executives in the technology field, Frank Massengill, says he goes beyond that narrow scope.

*What am I going to do, go in there and tell him about his company? No—that's not interesting to him, and he knows more about it than I do. Instead, I read about breaking industry trends and projections. I read about people who are making news in their industry and ask him about them. If I call on IBM, I might ask the executive what he thinks about a decision Michael Dell has made recently. They really enjoy talking about that, and it makes them want to have more conversations with me. I make sure that I have researched enough that I have something to contribute so there is value in talking to me. Gradually, I gain credibility and the executive's confidence so he is receptive to me.*

Angela Strickland, director of energy efficiency and conservation for Georgia Power Company, agrees that keeping current "gives you something of interest to talk about." She has breaking news alerts sent to her BlackBerry by the *Atlanta Business Chronicle*. Your local business newspaper or general interest newspaper probably has the same service. In addition to her industry education and experience, Angela credits her comfort with executives, in part for her fast advancement at a relatively young age in one of the largest electric utilities in the United States. She regularly meets elected officials of her state and top executives in her industry. She is always informed about her industry as well as events taking place in her state and community. Angela suggests bringing up a front-page story and then asking the executive what impact, if any, the event will have on the executive's industry or company. She also

suggests the following questions to engage executives in a more personal conversation meant to build relationships:

- Where did you go to college?
- What was your first professional position?
- What was your first job in your industry?

## **O = Opportunities**

Executives love talking about opportunities: opportunities for new revenue streams, opportunities for growth, opportunities for saving on money, labor, or other resources.

If you scratch the surface of most any executive, you will find a futurist hidden beneath the well-tailored suit. Executives are chosen, in part, for their abilities to see beyond the obvious and the status quo. They have often distinguished themselves in leadership, initiative, visionary thinking, and creative problem solving. They were able to exceed expectations in roles as individual contributors and first-line supervisors. Taking an existing organization and advancing it to the next level is part of their success path. For reasons like these, they usually respond well if you engage them in conversations about opportunities:

- Where do you think are the best new opportunities for revenue?
- What are some new products consumers would like to see from our industry?
- What opportunities might [this event] create for our industry? (Base this question on current news like the oil crisis or import/export legislation.)
- What areas of our company or industry do you think are the growth areas?
- Are there industries that support ours that will be growing over the next decade?
- If you were in my role, what would your advice be?

Not all executives are creative thinkers, but if you have the chance to speak with one who is, she will enjoy these future-oriented conversations immensely.

## **N = Neighborly talk**

If you are talking to a local executive, then you have something very important in common with your community. Community events, new construction, the arts, transportation, and many other community factors affect both your life and the executive's—instant common ground. If you know the executive is involved in the local opera or PTA or whatever, bringing up these topics may spark his interest.

## **CREATE YOUR OWN EVENTS AND OPPORTUNITIES**

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Today, Amy Kwon is the innovative founder of Signature Sweets by Amy, creators of

fantasy theme cakes for very special events in the corporate and social world. Before starting her own business, Amy had an extraordinarily successful career as a manager in a health-related nonprofit organization. Amy created opportunities for herself whenever she attended any work-related event.

A turning point in her career in the nonprofit arena was the day she attended an annual off-site meeting. Amy chose to rise early one morning and join a walking group that the meeting organizers listed as an optional activity. On that walk, Amy was able to get to know the chief operating officer of her company, someone she ordinarily would not have much exposure to. More to the point, the COO was able to get to know Amy and found her credible. Later, when Amy needed support for an important initiative her department was undertaking, the COO offered that support because the initiative was the right thing to do and she trusted Amy. The brief encounter had helped build that trust.

Amy's advice on meeting executives is, "Don't be shy. Everyone wants to meet new people, so step right up and introduce yourself." Many young professionals have found that the 10K runs, the walk-a-thons, and the corporate gym have offered them a way to level the ground between themselves and top executives. If you are a young IT professional and are biking across your state with your CIO, you will have an opportunity to get to know the executive in a way you never would have in the office.

Of course, sports and recreation events are not the only ways to get to know people who can help your career. Almost every executive is involved in one or more charities. Charities are always looking for volunteers. Voilà! You are a volunteer, and as such you are a valued part of something that has significance to the executive. The all-for-one-and-one-for-all camaraderie that pervades most volunteer activities gives you the potential for exposure to the executive. And you do some valuable work for the community at the same time.

As you work with an executive—perhaps helping to plan an event, or distinguishing yourself by selling the most memberships for the chamber of commerce when he is leading the membership drive—you are building relational capital. Working together toward a mutual goal outside the company will showcase skills you have that could be used inside the company. An executive may take notice and think of you the next time a new role needs to be filled with your skills set—even if it's several levels above your pay

grade. Such obstacles are not insurmountable for an executive.

Kevin Fletcher became an executive in a conservative, traditional utility company at a very young age—a real feat. He is perhaps the most relational executive in the utility industry today, demonstrating interpersonal skills that have brought him accolades from business people from Macon, Georgia, to Hong Kong. When he meets new people, Kevin says he always asks them where they are from. That one question often leads to all sorts of topics including family. Although you must be careful not to be too personal or invasive when you ask about family, simply asking where people are from allows them to tell you as much or as little about themselves as they want. The question is also open to interpretation. Some people will tell you about their roots. Others will proudly tell you about the posh suburb they live in or the transitional neighborhood they are helping revitalize. You never know when you are going to discover a new neighbor. And wouldn't it be an added bonus if the neighbor is an executive who becomes an advocate?

### **OPPORTUNITIES FOR USING THE M.I.S.S.I.O.N. MODEL**

Brush up on the M.I.S.S.I.O.N. model just before you attend any of the following events:

- Company functions that allow time for refreshments and conversation. Some of these events take place before or after a speaker.
- Retirement and promotion parties. Most executives have formed connections along the way with employees at all levels and will stop by these events to say congratulations.
- Professional meetings and trade show events. After all, you are in the midst of many decision makers who need people with your experience.
- Events outside the office that are attended by many people in your company: golf tournaments, races and walks, charitable occasions, civic and community events.

If you are on a mission to build career credibility, begin practicing the M.I.S.S.I.O.N. model on friends and associates at lower levels of the organization. You will be surprised how easily you will be able to apply the model to that unexpected conversation with an executive or key business contact when the time comes.

### **GAMES NOT TO PLAY WITH AN EXECUTIVE**

It's horrifying to see an up-and-coming, well-meaning employee sabotage his own career by trying one of the following approaches to impressing an executive. These do not work. Do not try these in your home company or anywhere else. Not only will the attempted gamesmanship in these tactics fail to inspire an executive to advance your career, but you will probably wind up on his personal "do not call" list. Although it might be tempting to prove your intelligence by upstaging the executive with your superior knowledge, a more

successful communicator will walk the line between drawing attention to her achievements and seeming arrogant.

### **Who's the smartest person in the room?**

This game was taught to you from your earliest elementary school years, so it seems unfair that it is suddenly unwise. In elementary school, you were encouraged to be the first kid with your hand in the air and to know all the answers. You were rewarded for that behavior for twelve years. You even got extra points for knowing things others didn't, and you were encouraged to demonstrate that to your teachers. In many ways, young people are encouraged to do this in college and in the competitive race to get into grad school. However, competing to be the smartest person in the room at a cocktail party or annual meeting just makes you appear obnoxious, especially if you are trying to prove the point in a ten-minute window with your favorite executive. Be realistic about what you can accomplish. Follow the golden rule of being more interested in others than yourself, and work in any conversation references to yourself gracefully. Only after expressing interest in the executive's company or other interests should you offer any nugget about yourself. If the executive mentions that she is thinking of using a blog to communicate with customers, you should take two actions. First, acknowledge what she said with a comment like "I can see that a blog would be very practical and effective for a local CPA firm like yours." Second, bring up your experience: "I have developed a blog for my college fraternity, and we were actually able to plan our entire ten-year reunion with it. Blogs are a great way to communicate with a large group that has something in common."

Don't drive the conversation relentlessly to topics that showcase you. Don't jump in too soon with the right answer or the pithy comment. Wait until the executive fully finishes a sentence, then pause for two seconds before speaking. Often, the executive will go on speaking and think you are extremely thoughtful in the way you listened so profoundly.

James M. Caswell, visionary real estate developer and founder of Habersham Partners, says, "I won't hire someone who is cocky. If I am hiring them, I have something to teach them rather than their teaching me." Caswell goes on to advise less-experienced careerists to be humble above all else in conversations with executives. This brilliant man, who has always seemed to have a knack for shrewdly predicting what office space and other commercial projects to build and where to build them, lives up to his own standards. In a thirty-minute interview, he mentioned at least six people he admired and gave them credit for his success. He enthusiastically admired one executive for his creativity, one for his generosity in opening doors for him with John Portman and other architects and developers, another for his profound intelligence, and still another for his ability to amass valuable land. Despite probing questions urging him to tout how he became successful, Caswell at no time took personal credit for the real estate successes in his career. Instead, he said, "I have never met a self-made man. Other people helped me, and that is true of every successful person I have ever met."

Take that as a cue. Allow the executive to tell you a principle or fact, even if you want to jump up and demonstrate that you already know it—perhaps even better than the executive does. Proving you are smarter than someone you want to mentor you is not a winning

strategy. Despite having a reputation for impeccable integrity and legendary honesty, Caswell says, in situations like this, “Humility is the better choice, even if you have to feign it for a moment.”

## **Twenty questions**

In an effort to show interest and engage the other person, some career people ask one question after another. This relentless barrage of questions backfires. Instead of seeming genuinely interested, the questioner appears to be manipulative and the questions contrived. You should allow plenty of time for response and discussion after each question. When you’re the questioner, be responsive to the answer; this is conversation at its best. Questions thrown at an executive like machine-gun fire can seem more like a grilling than a conversation with an enjoyable person who might be good to have around in the long term.

## **Stump the band/executive**

In this game, the employee spends time dreaming up the hardest or most outlandish question he can possibly think of to ask the executive. Why would anyone be so crazy? Often, the questioner is trying to distinguish himself and make a memorable impression. He does, but it is not a good one. Or the questioner may be trying to demonstrate how smart he is to have thought of such a deep, profound question. Whatever your motivation, don’t go there.

Investor Warren Buffett of Berkshire-Hathaway says, “You do not need to be a genius to be successful in business. If you have an IQ of 170 ... you’re probably best off selling 45 of those points to the highest bidder. What is most important is knowing the limits of and operating within your circle of competence—the range of personal skills and strengths you are able to use to give yourself an edge in the market.” (*Harbus*, January 23, 2006)

## **Trivia**

Mid- and lower-level employees give executives way too much credit for knowing everything. Executives often are great leaders and idea people, but may not know some of the facts you might think they would. Crafting a question about crass operating details can lead to an ugly moment. Stay away from minutiae; think big picture.

## **Ol’ buddy, ol’ pal**

In a mistaken attempt to appear casual and unrattled in the presence of an executive, some people take it too far and treat the executive with an inappropriate level of familiarity. The executive is still a professional acquaintance, several levels above you in ranking. Some deference and respect is due. Don’t cross boundaries that only personal friends would cross. These boundaries may relate to subjects like family and personal life or may involve personal space or touching on the arm or back.

## **Politics, religion, gender, and addiction**

You cannot assume what a person's politics or religion may be, so avoid topics such as religion on a first encounter. And no matter how well-intentioned the comment may be, generalizations about gender or sex-related comments can be viewed as sexist. Sexist remarks can include comments about women loving to shop or gay men having good taste or all men being sports fans. Just avoid categorizing people like this.

Politics, religion, and gender are obvious topics to stay away from, but there is another category these days: lifestyle and addiction-related topics. Gone are the days when people laughed good-naturedly at the drinking excesses of celebrities like Dean Martin. The tragic declines of people like Britney Spears, Tiger Woods, and Lindsay Lohan make reality prettier and grittier. More important, it is rare to find a family that has not been touched by some kind of addiction: gambling, pornography, drugs, alcohol, or whatever. It is not funny when you have watched family members or friends waste opportunities and surrender their lives to addiction. You could be considered insensitive and lacking in judgment if you make light comments about any type of addiction. Worse, the fact that you bring up alcohol or similar subjects can plant the seed of doubt about your own habits. No one needs an addictive personality as part of the team. The suggestion that you may have your own addiction issues could damage your prospects for inclusion in a team or project. If you avoid these pitfalls, you can leave the encounter knowing you have made a positive impression and built a link between you and an executive who could perhaps be influential in your career.

## **CLOSING OUT AN ENCOUNTER WITH AN EXECUTIVE**

What happens after you ask these executives great questions to engage in conversation? How do you gracefully exit? Amy Kwon, who has worked primarily in the nonprofit industry, which fosters lots of networking—offers these two suggestions:

- Don't linger too long. You can make your exit with a handshake and a "Nice meeting you."
- Remember to exchange information with the executive by offering your card. You want this to be a contact for the future.

If you are in a traditional, legacy company, you may not want to ask directly for the card of an executive several levels above you in your own company. Offer yours and hope that the executive reciprocates. Pay attention to the executive's response—both verbal and nonverbal—after you ask a question or bringing up a topic. If you see he is uncomfortable or uninterested in talking about a topic, move on. Some people try to force the question, thinking maybe the executive just didn't understand it; that is rarely the case. Go to Plan B.

## **NO LOOKING BACK**

With the encounter behind you, don't be self-critical. Sometimes, after a spontaneous meeting with an executive superstar, you may be tempted to pick apart everything you said and regret the brilliant things you forgot to say. Not only is this a waste of energy, but it is probably not

valid. Some executives will not give you a clue whether you have made a worthwhile impression—so don't expect verbal validation at the end of the conversation. (If you get on, go ahead and privately celebrate!)

Visionary Apple cofounder Steve Jobs is famous for not appearing warm or responsive during a first encounter (though insiders say once you get to know him he can be a great guy). Depending on whose blog you are reading, a chance meeting with Jobs may be described as an instant connection with the extraordinary cofounder of Microsoft and founder of Apple; however, occasionally these blogs describe Jobs as rude, abrupt, and nonresponsive. Is the difference with Jobs or with the take of the young idol-worshippers that meet him? What they take away may be more valuable than they realize. Take, for example, Shel Israel's blog *ItSeemsToMe*, in which he shares the following story:

*I had a similar encounter with a younger but equally ungracious Jobs in 1980, after he was keynote speaker for an event sponsored by the long defunct The Executive magazine. It was the first time I heard the "computers will change the way we work, play, and communicate speech," which was prophetic and inspirational to me. Afterwards, I waited outside for him in a cold December rain and when he left the building, I rushed up to him and told him that his talk had inspired me, that I had gone through a period where I had lost direction in life and that he had given it back to me. I wanted to join Apple and spread the word of the promise of his computers to humanity.*

*He stared at me for a second then asked me what I did for a living. I stammered that I loved to write, and right now I was working for a PR agency until I could find something meaningful. "My PR flack is Regis McKenna," he snapped more than a little impatiently. "Go work for him."*

*In fact, that's exactly what I did. But I never really worked much on the Apple account. As it turned out, that was a good thing. And I learned something about Jobs that seems to be true all these many years later. He's much more appealing when he's standing in front of five hundred people than he is close up.*

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(Shel Israel, *ItSeemsToMe*, August 2005. [http://seems2shel.typepad.com/itseemstome/2005/08/close\\_encounter.html](http://seems2shel.typepad.com/itseemstome/2005/08/close_encounter.html))

Though some executives are much more admirable from afar, I wonder if Israel is being fair to Jobs in this case. I'd say that Jobs was actually being quite generous and genuinely helpful, even if his manner and his choice of words were brusque—it was cold and rainy, the man was in a hurry, and he'd had many experiences of being waylaid by eager aspiring employees. From my perspective, here are the takeaways Israel got from the meeting:

- To be given the name of Steve Jobs's PR guy is a huge gift to a young writer. Jobs didn't give general advice like, "Go to work for one of the larger PR firms." He gave Israel a *name!* That's huge!
- Can you imagine calling Regis McKenna and saying, "Steve Jobs told me to call you?" What a door-opener, considering Jobs had no evidence of the quality of the young man's work! Again, even some of our friends and associates won't open doors that way, but Jobs did this for a total stranger.
- What impressed me most about this story is that, as deluged as Jobs was in the moment, he stopped and really looked at the young man (thoughtfully, one might



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