

Crossing the Terrain Between You and Your Goals

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by Gwen Hughes

As you look into the future of your career anticipating praise and frequent promotions, keep in mind your own contributions to personal success. Although AHIMA is working to expand HIM professionals' career horizons, one of the major forces behind this effort must come from you-in the form of image management.

When you and I decide what we want from our careers, it's important that we take stock of where we are right now, identify any terrain we need to cover to reach our destination, and then begin our journey to professional success. Perhaps Garson Kanin, an American dramatist, said it best: "Amateurs hope. Professionals work."

Where Do You Want to Go?

To begin that journey, we must have a destination in mind. For the purpose of this discussion, let us say that I am a HIM technician and I want to be the chief privacy officer (CPO) for my healthcare organization.

To chart a course, it is necessary to identify the territory that must be covered between my desired destination and present location. In the CPO example, I must examine what is required to be a CPO and the characteristics I currently possess or exhibit. If a CPO position already exists in my organization, I should give some thought to the person who currently occupies that position. How does the CPO look and communicate? What does the CPO know? If there is no such person or position right now, I should look to similar positions in other organizations and to individuals in my own organization whose positions might be at a commensurate level. Following are some characteristics to consider as you set your professional sights.

Education and Experience

Give some thought to the education, training, and experience required as a prerequisite for your desired career destination. In my experience, most organizations prefer individuals with a bachelor's or graduate degree in leadership positions. In the CPO example, it may be possible to acquire this position with successful experience leading or coordinating, HIM certification, and familiarity with applicable privacy laws and regulations. However, it is also possible that without at least a bachelor's degree, an otherwise good candidate might not get the job. If you lack an element of education, training, technical skills, or experience that will be required in your career destination of choice, fill that gap.

Speech

Next, think about how a person at your desired career destination is expected to speak. When I envision a CPO, he or she speaks confidently and adds meaningful content to the conversation. This person is diplomatic and concise. He or she exudes energy and uses complete, polished sentences.

We tend to associate the capacity to speak well with executive ability. We do not attribute leadership skills to individuals who speak so quietly that we must strain to hear them, who stutter or ramble, whine, lack energy, or who look at the table or floor rather than making eye contact when they speak.

Consider your own speech patterns. Do you look the listener in the eye? Do you speak with confidence? Are your sentences complete and concise? Does what you say add value to the conversation? If you stutter or ramble, whine, or have difficulty expressing yourself, then perhaps you should consider seeing a speech therapist, enrolling in a speech class, or joining Toastmasters.

Lowell Thomas, an American radio broadcaster and journalist, said, "The ability to speak is a short cut to distinction. It puts a man in the limelight, raises him head and shoulders above the crowd, and the man who can speak acceptably is usually given

credit for an ability out of proportion to what he really possesses."

Writing Skills

In addition to verbal skills, strong writing skills are crucial to a successful career. Think about the writing skills someone at your desired career destination is expected to possess. I would expect the CPO to be able to spell, use grammar and punctuation correctly, and be able to convey a message clearly and concisely.

How are your writing skills? Is your spelling accurate? Do you have trouble with grammar or sentence structure? Are you able to express yourself in writing clearly and succinctly? As a society, we make judgements about people with poor spelling, grammar, and sentence structure, or those whose thought process we just cannot follow.

If you have difficulty with spelling, use a spell checker before distributing anything you have written. If you have problems with grammar or sentence structure, consider hiring a tutor or taking an English class. If you struggle to communicate clearly or concisely, consider taking a business English class. Before sending documents, reread them to check for errors and from the perspective of someone who is seeing what you have to say for the first time. I find that it helps to limit memos to one page and to make sure the most salient points are in the first paragraph and the first sentence of each supporting paragraph. Most importantly, however, take time when constructing your messages to ensure they make sense.

The way we speak and the way we write communicates volumes about us. Former President Gerald Ford said, "If I went back to college again, I'd concentrate on two areas: learning to write and to speak before an audience. Nothing in life is more important than the ability to communicate effectively."

Appearance

When you envision a chief privacy officer, for example, how is he or she dressed? Is the CPO wearing a tailored suit, pumps, wingtips or loafers, and just a few pieces of simple, classic jewelry? Is his or her hair neat, and worn in a simple style?

As a society, we associate tailored business clothing with authority and confidence. As a result, the individual who adopts this manner of dress is going to have a much easier time convincing others that he or she is executive material than is the individual with green hair, multiple facial piercings, a tie-dyed shirt, ripped jeans, and sandals.

Now, how do you dress? Is there a chasm between the way the individual occupying the position you desire dresses and the way you dress? It will be much easier to reach the position you desire if you look the part.

Interpersonal Skills

Another characteristic to consider when evaluating the terrain between your current and desired career destination is your ability to get along with others. For those who aspire to work in front of a computer all day, people skills may be somewhat less important than for everyone else. The CPO, however, may not necessarily manage other people directly, but must work with them to achieve the objectives of his or her position. The CPO must not only understand the laws and regulations related to privacy and be able to communicate the issues verbally and in writing, but must listen, work with, and persuade others to adhere to these privacy laws, regulations, and standards.

So consider the people skills that will be required in your career destination. Do you work well with others or do people react poorly to you? For some, the ability to work effectively with others comes easily. Others must work much harder at it. Almost everyone, however, benefits from learning about personality styles or traits and how best to communicate, lead, and reward various personality types. Consider reading about or attending management classes about personality styles. I have also found the book *Leadership* and the *One Minute Manager* by Kenneth Blanchard to be quite useful.

Network

It's also helpful to establish a network of colleagues who can assist you on your journey. If you haven't already done so, join and become active in one or more professional groups where you can observe and learn from others.

The Journey

Once we've identified the terrain between our present location and career of choice, it's important that we develop a plan for our journey. That journey might include dressing more professionally, improving our verbal skills by participating in Toastmasters, spending a little more time crafting e-mail before sending it, or becoming more knowledgeable about a certain subject by reading, attending related seminars, or going back to school. The person who thinks he can succeed eventually will, but keep in mind this observation from Vidal Sassoon: "The only place where success comes before work is in the dictionary."

Reference

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