



Career Compass No. 7: How Do I Create a "Dream Team" of Advisors?

In this Career Compass, I address how to build a network of advisors who can help support your career advancement goals:

- I'm a mid-career professional and everyone tells me that I need a good network to support my career advancement. However, I know senior managers are very busy and I am therefore reluctant to burden them with another obligation. I also do not know how I feel about developing relationships and then asking others to help me. It feels a bit manipulative. In any case, how do I create this network?

Everyone is correct - you do indeed need a good network of advisors to help you on a number of fronts. Members of a network can:

- Suggest how you may handle problematic situations at work.
- Alert you to new job opportunities inside and outside your organization.
- Serve as connectors to others who may be able to provide advice or resources.
- Advise you on how to enhance your skills, gain new experiences, and position yourself for advancement.
- Serve as a sponsor in helping you secure an appointment to an interdepartmental team or a professional committee or access some other opportunity such as a training program.
- Provide information, data, knowledge, and expertise.
- Serve as a sounding board for advice.

A network should include a diversity of people who can assist you with different kinds of challenges and issues. One advisor may be adept at coaching you when you face a difficult personal issue. Another advisor may be better at connecting you to others who have information or specialized expertise. Therefore, your network should encompass not just senior managers and other professionals inside your organization but also professionals outside your organization. They can be in your same discipline - finance, public works, community services - or better yet from several disciplines, including general management. Your network need not only consist of senior people but also peers in local government and non-local government colleagues from the business, nonprofit, or academic worlds.

Let's deal with a widely-held misconception. Asking someone to coach you or help you in some fashion is not a burden. Coaches love to coach. People love to give advice or share their knowledge and expertise. (Why do you think I write this column?) You are doing them a favor by asking for assistance. In addition, once a relationship is formed, you will be helping them as well.

So, what are some approaches for developing a "dream team" of advisors? Here are my 11 tips:

1. Be on the look-out for advisors

You should consciously search out and identify colleagues and senior people who can provide support in different ways. When you meet someone or get to know another colleague, ask yourself: "Would this person be a good advisor?"

2. Fill in the gaps in your network

If your dream team does not include someone with good connections in your state association or other professional organization, you need to attend some conferences or professional meetings, check out who is presenting or leading a committee, and then approach those professional leaders and offer your assistance to the committee or some other professional activity. Make sure you follow up with an e-mail or personal note.

3. Use dream team members to suggest other advisors

One advisor can connect you with another potential advisor and offer an introduction. Many people love to serve as connectors.

4. Seek coaches through your professional organization

Some professional organizations like ICMA and my own state association, Cal-ICMA, offer the services of senior managers as coaches. If you participate in ICMA's Emerging Leaders Development Program, you get a "legacy coach." The Cal-ICMA Coaching Program offers free one-on-one coaching match-ups through its online "Coaches Gallery" which profiles city/county managers, department heads, and other senior managers (go to www.cal-icma.org and click on "Coaches Gallery" on the right-hand side of the home page). Anyone can use this one-on-one coaching service - just go to the "Coaches Gallery," select a coach of your liking, and then make contact to get advice. It's easy.

5. Be ready to network

You should arrive at a professional or regional meeting with your business cards. Develop and practice a concise "elevator speech" of who you are, what you do, and what interests you. When you meet someone, have some questions prepared in advance to ask about the other person. People love to talk about themselves, their interests, and opinions.

6. Listen intently and be positive

When you talk to someone, look the person in the eye, smile, and listen intently. Don't look over the person's shoulder, scouting out other people to meet. Be in the present moment. And, in these stressful and often demoralizing times, be positive, upbeat, and forward-looking.

7. Don't just introduce yourself

Introducing yourself to a colleague, having a brief conversation, and exchanging business cards are necessary first steps, but don't stop there. The question is how to create an ongoing relationship. Follow-up your initial encounter by providing some information of potential interest or contacting the person and asking for advice or scheduling an informational interview.

8. Offer assistance and help to members of your network

To solidify relationships and to enjoy the give-and-take nature of networks, you need to serve as a resource to others. Don't wait to be asked. Send an article or a job announcement or some recent survey results to appropriate members of your network. They will then be more open to offering assistance to you when you need it.

9. Maintain relationships even when you don't need help

You need to sustain the social connection even when you are not looking for assistance. Call or e-mail a colleague to simply catch-up or schedule a coffee or make a point of touching base with a colleague at a conference.

10. Say thank you

Always, always express your appreciation. At least send an e-mail. Even better, a personal note will make an impression especially in this electronic age. Expressing your gratitude will help cement and further solidify your relationships.

11. Dot it because it is fun!

Certainly, a dream team of advisors provides a lot of extrinsic value. However, you should consider extending your professional and social network because it is fun and intrinsically enjoyable. It is enjoyable to know colleagues at a professional meeting, to help others, to exchange information and perspectives, to tell war stories, to be connected to a valuable profession.

Now is the time to begin drafting members of your dream team. A team of advisors is not created overnight - it takes a while if you are consciously and incrementally building a team.

Don't wait! Start now. It's fun.

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