

BY PATRICK IBARRA

HOW FIT ARE YOU TO ADVANCE?

Accelerate your capabilities

One of the e-mails I received after the first Career Track column was published in the March 2016 issue of PM was from John, a young professional who works in local government in Georgia. His question was about identifying the most effective methods by which he could accelerate his capabilities and thus, advance his career.

John is a member of a generation of employees who realize they possess a portfolio of skills and don't define themselves simply by a job title. Indeed, they own their careers and are responsible for maneuvering the often uneven terrain of local government.

Individual Career Planning

Ambition is a mindset, and it requires sustenance to catalyze your career. The first step is to decide what a "good career" means to you and plan for it. Resist the urge to type up your career plan on your computer. Instead, take out a sheet of paper.

Writing things down helps you internalize and process the information on an intuitive level. Intrigued? Pick up the new book *Deep Work* (Grand Central Publishing, 2016) by Cal Newport to learn more.

Speaking of books, they are a valuable resource to stretch your mind. Several worthy of note focus on how to develop cutting-edge skills.

These include: *Become a 21st Century Executive* (Infinity Publishing, 2015) by Nigel Dessau; *Act Like a Leader, Think Like a Leader* (Harvard Business Review Press, 2015) by Herminia Ibarra (no relation to me); *Your First Leadership Job* (Wiley, 2015) by Tacy Byham and Richard Wellins; *The Productivity Project* (Crown Business, 2016) by Chris Bailey; *Stretch: How to Future-Proof Yourself for Tomorrow's Workplace* (Wiley, 2016) by Karie Wil-

lyerd and Barbara Mistick; and *What to Do When You're New* (AMACOM, 2015) by Keith Rollag.

Here are some additional insights to further your career advancement efforts:

- **Growth and comfort don't coexist so seek out stretch assignments that push you beyond your comfort zone.** Acquiring new skills rarely arrives in a gift box.
- **Deepen your subject-matter expertise.** Being the in-house expert on all things related to curbside recycling helped me land an assistant city manager position. While my story may be a bit dated, this principle remains intact.
- **Crave curiosity.** Explore new opportunities and ways that help your organization improve services and operations. Be vigilant and stay current on the forces for change and how they might impact your organization and community.
- **Search for a mentor.** Even if it's an informal relationship and not sponsored by your employer, that's fine. Your mentor may even be from a different organization than yours. Meet and talk regularly, but don't expect your mentor to drive your career—that is up to you. In other words, don't ask him or her the classic question, "What can I do to grow my career."

Workplace Career Development

My questions to leaders and managers of organizations include: How deep is your bench? How strong is the talent pool to fill soon-to-be open positions? How have you modernized your employee-value proposition to say, "Join us, or stay with us, because we will help you realize your potential."

A 2015 study by the Society for Human Resource Management identified the most pressing future human capital challenge as "developing the next

generation of organizational leaders" (39 percent of respondents). In second place, came "managing the loss of key workers and their skill sets" (35 percent of respondents).

Another question I like to pose to managers: What if you don't develop your workforce and they stay?

Taking control of uncertainty and successfully steering an organization through frequent turns in the road is the ultimate leadership challenge of our time. Leaders and managers, therefore must take these actions:

- Create a culture of career development by advocating it as an imperative and equipping senior leaders with the skills they need to have career conversations with employees on an ongoing basis. That's more than the one annual performance review discussion.
- Foster a workplace culture that reflects leaders you are trying to both attract and retain. Replace the word "training" in your organization's budget with the word "learning." Training is an expense while learning is an investment.
- Establish and implement a formal mentoring program matching willing mentors with excited protégés.
- Participate in "Workplace Wednesday," a new monthly program sponsored by the Alliance for Innovation designed to increase employee engagement. For more information, check its website at www.transformgov.org.

Continue to e-mail your questions on career development and talent management to me at patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com. **PM**



PATRICK IBARRA

Former city manager
Partner The Mejorado Group
Glendale, Arizona
patrick@gettingbetterallthetime.com