

Introduction

Get Real About Getting Ahead

I was stunned.

And when I looked across the table at Lauren, one of our newer, younger associates, and Webb, their boss, I could see that I wasn't the only one in the room who couldn't believe what they'd just heard. Entry-level newbies just don't talk to senior-level executives like Megan just did. For that matter, senior-level executives don't even talk to one another like that—at least not in the open, not if they value their reputation and career. But Megan seemed to have no idea that she had said anything inappropriate. Nor did she have a clue that her body language was equally out of line.

Like many young, up-and-coming, eager-to-get-ahead business professionals, Megan is articulate, talented, and well educated. During eighteen years of grade school, high school, and college, she had earned her MBA and mastered many skills. She writes well-structured sentences. She understands accounting and is technologically savvy. She's well versed in her field and is a quick study. But Megan's defensive words in response to questions about the source of some numbers and the con-

clusions in her report, teamed with her angry red face, rolling eyes, and huffing deep breaths, revealed a glaring deficiency in her education—and dangerously undermined her potential. Like many of her contemporaries, Megan was sorely lacking in political savvy and other practical skills she would need to succeed long term.

I interrupted her display of exasperation by asking Lauren and Webb if I might speak to Megan alone. Sensing trouble, Megan gulped. Her facial color transformed from scarlet to ashen white. Her gaze followed her supervisor and colleagues out the door and didn't seem to want to return to look me in the eye.

"Am I in trouble?" she asked, giving me a sheepish and genuinely perplexed look.

I took a brief pause to gather just the right words and to muster just the right tone—habits Megan lacked. "Megan, I'm not angry," I began, "but I do want to help you understand some things, things that will profoundly affect your career—
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here or anywhere else you might go."

When I said "go," Megan's eyes widened. It was obvious that she was starting to imagine the worst.

Since that wasn't my intended message, I promptly assured her that her job was not in jeopardy—yet. My purpose wasn't to chastise her or give her a scolding; I simply wanted to help her begin to understand that social skills are not silly frills. They are essentials if you want to climb higher than the bottom rungs of the business ladder.

Over the next two hours, Megan and I discussed her goals, her ambitions, her background, her life at the time, and, most importantly, what she would need to learn and do in order to move from where she was to where she wanted to be.

As she left my office, Megan thanked me and asked if we could meet again for more counseling sessions and maybe even work on some of her issues by e-mail. She asked if I would consider serving as her mentor—no holds barred—and if I would

help her see what could be considered blind spots so that she could advance.

I was surprised, frankly flattered, and definitely pleased. “Megan,” I told her, “I will help you, but know that you might not always agree with and might not follow my advice. Your career is about *your* choices, and I want you to own your decisions. I hope you learn from my successes—as well as from my mistakes; I’ve made too many and likely have made mistakes I haven’t even identified yet. Still, I believe I have some wisdom to share.”

I suggested that we utilize e-mail as much as possible during this modern-day mentoring process. In that way, we would be able to think about what we wanted to ask each other and how we wanted to reply. Also, our dialogue would be off the company clock.

And that’s how it all began, a mentor–mentee relationship that promised to provide both of us with any number of benefits: professional growth, insight, respect, collegiality, and tips and strategies for gaining confidence, building skills, and getting real about what it takes to build long-term career success.

Megan isn’t the only one who could benefit from some no-holds-barred mentoring. Many of today’s up-and-coming, eager-to-get-ahead business professionals are articulate, talented, and well educated. They’re technologically savvy. They’re quick studies. But too many of these bright young professionals can all too often be defensive, inappropriate, poorly mannered, and obtuse. They lack the political savvy and practical skills that will help them succeed in the long term. They need some tough love. They need some common sense. And they need to get real about what it really takes to get ahead—and stay ahead.

That “up-and-coming, eager-to-get-ahead business professional” might well be you—even if it might be difficult or uncomfortable to recognize yourself in the part of that description that flags some faults. But know that all of this comes from a place of love—albeit, of course, a place of tough love.

Here's the thing: Whether "junkyard dogs" or "pedigrees," today's young professionals—people just like you—are in need of mentors who will tell them what it really takes to climb above the bottom rungs of the corporate ladder to achieve their goals. As a former C Suite executive, an executive recruiter, and a career coach, I hope to be that mentor for you. As a non-nonsense Southern woman who knows what it takes to balance that junkyard dog in you (the scrappy, hard-charging, rough-edged go-getter) with your inner pedigree (that polished, poised, advantaged professional), I know what it's like to learn the hard way what it takes to get ahead—and stay ahead. You see, although today most people think I'm a pedigree, I'm actually one of those self-professed junkyard dogs. I've worked hard to fit in to the world of the pedigrees—without compromising my values or leading an inauthentic life.

In the pages that follow, I will share a lifetime of real-world experience and insight, all designed to help today's young professionals get ahead while improving their reputations—and without leaving a wake of professional destruction behind them. I'll share wisdom (a code word for "old," I know, but useful nonetheless) gained not only from my own successes and failures, but from real-world examples of the many people I've mentored over the years, people who have worked their way from the cubicle to the C Suite (that is, the exclusive enclave where the CEO, CFO, COO, and other top-level executives do their thing).

Some of the insight and wisdom in these pages might sound a little harsh. That's because sometimes facing reality is harsh. And, with that, my first bit of advice—a mantra that I want you to repeat to yourself over and over again—is to get real.

Yes, you read that right: Get real.

You might be smart and savvy and full of vim and vigor. But get real: So is just about everyone else you work with.

You might have great ideas that you're sure will propel you to the top of the professional heap. Get real: Plenty of your

colleagues have equally great ideas. It's how you present those ideas and how you act on those ideas that matter.

You might have a shiny new MBA from an elite school. But get real: Your scrappy colleague from that state school you never heard of is equally bright—and you both need to learn how to work together as colleagues and, very likely, teammates. And, just as you have to get real, you have to get over your- self. Let's face it: Although plenty of books and self-help guides and online articles are full of five or seven or ten tips that profess to teach you exactly what it takes to make yourself indispensable at work, the truth is that everyone—including you (even though you *are* fabulous)—is dispensable. In the real world, business is all about “what have you done for me lately.”

And if you're not performing, if you're not presenting yourself and your ideas in the best light, if you're promoting them and your ideas aggressively instead of assertively, well, then you can pretty much expect that the next rung on the ladder will be out of reach.

That is, it'll be out of reach until you figure out what it takes to get ahead—and stay ahead.

Millions of young professionals—or perhaps I should say would-be young professionals—are struggling in an economic climate that in late 2015 was improving but remained tough. Unemployment levels are decreasing, but roughly 4 million workers between the ages of 18 and 35 remained unemployed or underemployed as of early 2015.¹ Toward the end of 2015, the numbers had improved only slightly: Among 25- to 34-year-olds, the unemployment rate hovered around 5.5 percent, higher than the national average.² Women account for higher percentages of unemployed and underemployed work-

1. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age*. Retrieved March 23, 2015, from <http://www.bls.gov/news.release/empsit.t02.htm>.

2. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Labor Force Statistics from the Current Population Survey*. Retrieved August 27, 2015, from <http://data.bls.gov/pdq/SurveyOutputServlet>.

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I'm surprised to see the

ers; 67.7 percent of men over the age of twenty are employed compared to 55.4 percent of women.³

It would be easy to assume that those workers are somehow lacking in the skills, education, or experience they really need to land that perfect job. That might well be true of at least some of them, but the reality is that many of these would-be workers are perfectly capable individuals who likely might do well in their chosen fields. But in today's highly competitive world, being capable isn't nearly enough.

Sadly, that's not a message that enough young professionals hear. Over the past decade or so, we've taken to telling our young people that each and every one of them is a winner. We tell them that just making an effort—any effort—is enough to win the game, to get the prize. We give them trophies just for showing up.

Seriously?

Again, we need to get real.

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In the real world, in the professional world, the only trophy you get for showing up is a paycheck at the end of the week. No one climbs the corporate ladder with minimal effort. And by no means is everyone a winner.

No, in today's world, professionals need to learn the dos and don'ts of business. They need to know what to do—and what *not* to do—in order to move ahead, to strategize their careers, and to climb that corporate ladder all the way to the C Suite. It is in this knowledge that employees can level the playing field, regardless of pedigree or tenure.

We'll talk about just those things in the pages that follow, and we'll start in right away. Right off the bat, in Chapter 1, we'll look at how career-long success depends on balancing your inner junkyard dog with your pedigree. What's a junkyard dog? A junkyard dog is that scrappy, street-savvy, tenacious professional who has worked hard for everything she's got. A

3. Bureau of Labor Statistics. *Employment Status of the Civilian Population by Race, Sex, and Age*.

pedigree is that advantaged, well-educated, poised worker who often is lucky enough to work connections in order to leapfrog up the corporate ladder. One isn't necessarily better than the other, and certain situations might call for one over the other, but long-term career success depends on balancing these two inner beasts. As a born-and-bred junkyard dog myself, I know about this firsthand, and I'll share my insight in Chapter 1.

Balancing your junkyard dog and your pedigree has much to do with branding yourself, a topic we'll address in Chapter 2. Does your manager consider you a leader? Do your colleagues think of you as a resource? Early in your career, you might earn a reputation as the go-to person, the one who gets things done. Over time, you need to become the person who gets things done through others. All of this speaks to the ways in which you brand yourself throughout your career. All you have is your reputation, and you need to protect your reputation at all costs. Whether you become known as a junkyard dog or a pedigree is wholly within your control, so long as you do what it takes to build your own professional brand. Part of that requires you to balance your inner junkyard dog with your pedigree. It also requires you to be authentic—because branding yourself means being yourself. In Chapter 2, we'll look at how to brand yourself, what it takes to brand yourself, and why it's important to protect your personal and professional brands.

Just as you think about your professional reputation and your personal brand, you also need to think about your overall career strategy. This is something that a lot of us—and women in particular—never really think about. Too many of us just sort of roll along on our career trajectories, getting promoted here and there, taking a new job now and again, but without really thinking about what we really want, what our long-term career goals are, or what we need to do to achieve those goals. But the reality is that few of us get through our careers—much less land on top—without really wanting it. You can't just hope your way to the C Suite. You have to want it. You have to claim

it. And then you have to own it. You can't be a little bit CEO or a little bit COO. You have to know what job you really want—and then you have to go for it. This means you have to be prepared for opportunities when they come along. It also means you can't be afraid of what you want, because "I want it" has nothing to do with gender or pedigree. In Chapter 3, we'll look at why it's important to understand what you want and why you want it—and what you'll do with it when you get it.

Being prepared for opportunities means more than just keeping your eyes open for good things that might cross your path. When you're looking for opportunities, you need to look for those opportunities where you can have an impact and where you can be visible. You need to network, you need to join a task force, you need to sign up for continuing education, you need to join interagency task forces. You need to make the most of opportunities that will help you grow your career. This means that you can't be afraid to take risks. You will be challenged throughout your career. Sometimes you'll succeed. Sometimes you'll fail. If those risks—and even those failures—help you grow as a leader, then the chance was worth taking. Don't allow fear or hard work to dissuade you from taking chances, because when you come out on the other side, it builds your confidence—and you'll know you can take on other opportunities. In Chapter 4, we'll look at why it's important to look for opportunities and to take risks—and how both junkyard dogs and pedigrees can make the most of challenges.

Taking risks and making the most of opportunities will matter little if you can't make the most of them. And that means you have to keep track of every risk you take and every opportunity you leap at. Why? Because the best leaders manage based on results. This means you have to keep score of your accomplishments—and you have to claim them. Make sure to take credit for the work you've done, whether good or bad, whether success or failure. Lead in every direction, learn from every level, and get feedback from those around you, whether above you, alongside you, or below you. Whether junkyard

dog or pedigree, it's important to manage for results across the organization. Because it's all about performance—regardless of gender, regardless of pedigree. In Chapter 5, we'll look at why learning how to manage up, down, and sideways is crucial for young professionals who want to get ahead.

Leaders keep score. They manage based on results. And they also know how to make the most of leadership styles that work. Of course, every leader is different. Studies have shown that while men are more likely to adopt a transactional leadership style, women tend to assume a transformational leadership style. This means that women naturally work at building consensus and encouraging teamwork, which can go a long way in getting effective, long-term, sustained results. That doesn't mean that more transactional leadership can't be useful, particularly in the short term, but it does mean that women have a natural tendency to employ an effective leadership style. In Chapter 6, we'll look at the differences between these two leadership styles, when one might be more preferable than the other, and how junkyard dogs and pedigrees alike can make the most of leadership opportunities.

Leadership style is important, as is knowing which style to deploy in which situation. But style has to be based on substance, and that means that you have to understand the business of business. Think about it: Do you understand the numbers that get your business to the bottom line? Do you understand the strategies that position your business in your industry? Or are you so caught up in your day-to-day role that you're not looking at what it takes to run your company's business? It's easy to fall into silos and not think about the business as a whole. But you can't understand the mission if you don't understand the margins. You need to understand what's happening on Wall Street and Main Street. You need to understand market share, service lines, and product offerings. You need to understand the competition. And you need to understand where your organization fits in. Whether junkyard dog or pedigree, you must know what's going on in your industry

and in your organization—and what your own effect on the bottom line is. Do your homework. Be prepared. And people will listen. That has nothing to do with gender or pedigree; it has everything to do with knowledge. In Chapter 7, we'll look at the key areas that young professionals need to understand, and I'll explain why knowing the business of business can help pave the way forward.

Moving forward requires today's young professionals to balance a lot of things at once. Understanding the business of business, employing appropriate leadership style, keeping score of successes and failures—all of that is crucial if you want to get ahead. But you can all too easily derail your upward trajectory if you fail to understand business etiquette, cultural competency, and all those little things that reveal to your colleagues—and to your bosses—who you really are and what you're really like. Believe me, I've seen it all: cleavage during an interview. A flash of gold anklet during an executive-level meeting. Lower-level employees who incessantly drive the conversation during a client dinner while the boss fumes from across the table. Whether junkyard dog or pedigree, everyone can benefit from a little etiquette know-how and some cultural competency. In fact, understanding these issues is crucial for anyone who's aiming for the C Suite. In Chapter 8, we'll tackle some commonsense issues when it comes to culture and etiquette, providing the crucial training in an area that is too easily overlooked.

Another thing that so many professionals—regardless of gender, pedigree, or tenure—overlook is the value of intuition. Intuition is something most of us recognize even though few of us could explain it well. We know something because we just . . . well . . . *know* it. Intuition is that sixth sense that often helps us make decisions and avoid danger. High-level business leaders often have to make quick, intuitive decisions. But “intuitive” doesn't mean “uninformed.” We need to know the facts about our business, but we also can develop our intuitive abilities by using them wisely. Part of that requires us to

trust ourselves and those around us. Trust is a two-way street, though, and so it's important to know whom to trust and when to trust them. In Chapter 9, we'll look at how young professionals can use trust and intuition to their advantage. We'll also examine how women in particular—both junkyard dogs and pedigrees—can develop skills in this area in order to help them become better decision makers.

Women, men. Pedigrees, junkyard dogs. Throughout our careers, all of us will deal with all sorts of people from all walks of life: men and women, junkyard dogs and pedigrees. We need to learn how to work with everyone. We also need to learn how to network with everyone. Why? Because you never know who might be able to help you advance your career. And you'll never know who you're sitting next to—on an airplane, on the subway, at a conference—unless you talk to that person. You never know if the next person you meet is going to be a friend, a mentor, an advocate, or an employer. Build your sphere of influence and seek out new people. Introduce yourself, and you will be remembered. Do it even if you're shy or reluctant. Because networking—especially for women and especially for junkyard dogs—opens doors in ways nothing else can. In Chapter 10, we'll dig into the whys and hows of networking and building relationships.

Networking is a great way to level the playing field. It is a real equalizer. Because, regardless of how much we might like to think that men and women are equal, the truth is that every woman will face a variety of gender issues throughout her career. Once chastised by a male colleague for wearing a pantsuit instead of a skirt to a client meeting, I know about such issues firsthand. But the reality is that most business issues—financial details, corporate strategy, management, and leadership—aren't gender issues. Of course, gender issues are still out there, and today's young professionals need to understand when, where, and why they'll pop up—and how to deal with them. Whether junkyard dog or pedigree—or a little bit of both—today's professionals (and women in particular) need

to learn how to handle gender issues with grace. We'll discuss some real-world strategies for doing just that in Chapter 11.

Networking and building relationships is a lifelong activity. In fact, as we move up the corporate ladder, it becomes incumbent upon us to lend a helping hand to those who are coming up behind us. When we're able to share our experiences and give back, we can pull each other up. Today, only 18 of the Fortune 500 CEOs are women. Women account for just 15 percent of C Suite positions.⁴ Lending a helping hand means becoming a mentor—and avoiding “Feline Syndrome.” Help someone get promoted. Give someone some guidance. Give another woman your business. Be generous with your time, your knowledge, your experience, and your spirit. Remember where you came from and what it was like to work in the trenches. These efforts are inequality equalizers that can help level the playing field. Whether junkyard dog or pedigree, women can—and should—help other women up the corporate ladder. In Chapter 12, we'll look at why doing so is a win-win for everyone.

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As you move through your career, following the strategy you've plotted for yourself, it's important to keep networking, to build relationships, to lend a helping hand to those around you. But it's also important to be true to yourself. We all evolve and change during the course of our careers, but it's crucial to keep those parts that are essential to you. Claiming the pedigree in you doesn't mean giving up or completely silencing your junkyard dog—that scrappiness, that resourcefulness, or that assertiveness can still come in handy. By learning to be constructive instead of critical, assertive instead of aggressive, accepting instead of defensive, you can honor yourself and your values while still making the most of the environment in which you work. Find your junkyard dog, keep your junkyard dog in check, and balance it with the pedigree in you. In Chapter 13,

4. Aaron Taube. “Lean In’ Isn’t Enough: Women’s Progress in Leadership Has Stalled,” *Business Insider*, September 23, 2014. Retrieved October 11, 2015, from <http://www.businessinsider.com/why-women-arent-getting-more-c-suite-jobs-2014-9>.

I'll share some commonsense advice for honoring yourself and your values while working your way toward the C Suite.

Being true to yourself requires some balance. In fact, "balance" is a buzzword we hear a lot these days, particularly when it comes to that mythical "work-life balance." Work-life balance is something people have been talking about—if not achieving—for decades. How, in a highly connected, 24/7 world can today's young professionals balance work and family and volunteering and health and all the other issues that come with life? How do women handle Mommy Guilt? These are issues that everyone has to deal with, whether junkyard dog or pedigree, and I have been no exception. I know what it's like to miss key moments in a child's life. I understand what it's like to realize that everyone—*everyone*—is dispensable. Work should be enjoyable. It should be meaningful. But it shouldn't be everything. In Chapter 14, we'll look at what it really means to balance work and life.

Look: Moving up the corporate ladder isn't easy. Earning a chair in the C Suite requires today's professionals to balance work and life, to balance their inner junkyard dogs with their pedigrees, to build relationships and network while balancing gender issues. It requires knowing what you want, going after it, and then owning it. A lot of self-help books, business guides, and advice columns tell readers that just by following their dreams, they'll live happily ever after, rich in happiness and fulfillment, if not in dollars.

Let's get real: It takes a little more than simply following your dreams if you hope to make it to the C Suite. Sometimes, following your dreams and finding your passion means discovering anew something you're good at, something that matters to you, and something that gets you fired up. Today's young professionals need to learn that they can discover passion for their work through any number of routes—if they're open to it. That's because passion is about being the best you can be at *whatever* you do. In the last part of the book, I'll share a few words about what it takes to fuel your career and how you can

tap into a variety of passions about your work to find lasting success and fulfillment.

Tough love is good for us. Everyone could use a little tough love now and again. Everyone could use a dose of reality. And everyone would benefit from tactics to help level the playing field, regardless of gender, pedigree, or tenure.

Of course, you might not like some of the things we're going to discuss in these pages. I'll be the first one to admit that some of the insight and advice I'll share will be bitter pills, indeed. But instead of Pollyanna-ing your way through life, why not just face reality? Let's all get over ourselves and get real. Let's admit that we're not all born winners—but we can all become winners if we accept some tough love, use some common sense, and employ some tested, real-world strategies for climbing the corporate ladder all the way to the C Suite.