



SOCIETY OF ACTUARIES

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# Dig into Challenges for Career and Business Growth

by John West Hadley

In the October issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I talked about using self-appraisals to raise your visibility and accelerate your career growth. Today I'd like to talk about another way to put your career or consulting business on the fast track: digging into challenges.

When was the last time you had a serious discussion with your boss about the challenges he or she faces? Do you really understand what keeps your manager up at night, and exactly why that is? If so, you are poised to become a powerful ally in whatever matters most to him or her.

My experience is that few of us think to do that. Or if we do, we don't dig very deeply.

It's not enough to understand that your superior is worried about revenue growth. That doesn't give you much to work with, nor does it really tell you what's going on. You want to understand what's behind that. For example:

- Why is revenue growth the biggest concern?
- What type of revenue growth is of most concern—new or established markets, new or old products or product lines, large or small customers, certain target sectors, etc.?
- How is the problem showing up? Is it that sales are showing signs of slowing overall? Is it the impact of the general economy? Are the most profitable target markets showing the greatest sluggishness? Is it a concern about the future that hasn't yet materialized in current numbers?
- What symptoms and factors are behind the problem?
- What is the problem costing the company? The department? Your boss personally?

The further down you dig, the deeper the perspective you get, and the more your boss sees you as both very interested in his or her issues, as well as someone who asks insightful, penetrating questions. This will also position you in the best possible way

to contribute to the solutions, and to shape your own work priorities to better align with what matters most to your superiors.

There's also an interesting phenomenon that occurs. Often just asking these deeper questions gives the person you are asking new insights into the problems. Even if you don't have a lot to contribute to inform the discussion, you often help lead them down productive avenues, and you will get some credit in their eyes just from that.

Don't let this process stop with your boss. Get into the habit of digging into challenges deeply with colleagues, people of influence in other departments, networking contacts, and potential buyers of your products or services. The more you do it, the more natural it will become, and the more people will see you as someone truly interested in helping them with their own issues.

You will be surprised at how much you can raise your personal stock—and truly help people in the bargain—if you just get into the habit of digging deeply into challenges! ●



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