



Article from

## **The Stepping Stone**

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# WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

## Responses to “Opportunity Knocks?”

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In the November issue of *The Stepping Stone*, I posed the question “*What would you do?*” to the following career situation. Below are selected responses, edited for space and clarity. At the end is the real-life conclusion of the situation. Send your own ideas for situations to pose in upcoming issues to [SteppingStone@JHACareers.com](mailto:SteppingStone@JHACareers.com).

### OPPORTUNITY KNOCKS?

Michael built and runs the actuarial department, reporting to the chief actuary, Harvey. For several years, he has been Harvey’s only direct report, and their previously strong relationship has eroded. Then Harvey announces that Michael is moving into a newly created corporate development role, reporting to the president (Harvey’s boss), with no staff, and that Michael’s prior direct reports will now report to Harvey.

Michael is compensated well, really enjoys working for his current company, and it is only 10 miles from home. However, he is concerned that he had no input into or warning of the reorganization, and while corporate development sounds interesting, he wonders whether it is simply a makeshift role with an uncertain future.

What would you do?

*One actuary synthesized the situation this way:*

At one extreme, maybe this reorganization means that Harvey wants Michael out of the company and this is a way of keeping Michael around during a transition period. At another extreme, maybe Michael is being seen as someone who is more Harvey’s peer than underling. This is just step one of a plan to eliminate Harvey’s role at the company.

At either extreme, the president of the company is not likely to tell Michael the whole truth about the reasons for the reorganization. It is up to Michael to decide what to do now. He has the opportunity to report to senior management and prove his value to the company—or not. If he wants to stay at the company, it is his call.

My personal assumption would be that if the president wants me reporting to him, that is a good thing. Play it for all it is worth.



Getting stabbed in the back by your manager more likely results in losing your job, not in getting what appears to be a promotion.

*This response interpreted the move as negative:*

Without a convincing explanation from Harvey that the new position is aligned with my professional interests, I would look for another job. I would not like to become a pawn in a game of chess.

*While this suggested it was a positive development:*

While Michael was unaware of the pending reorganization, and it is uncertain how the new role could play out, it does report directly to the president.

Such a position is likely a critical and influential role, despite having no direct reports. This reporting relationship, along with continued success in the new role, has the ability to further Michael’s career at the company and beyond.

Michael should allow a minimum of 12 to 18 months to let the new role develop, and be active in shaping the role to best fit the corporation’s developmental needs, before deciding if it is truly a “makeshift” role. Additionally, Michael should ask Harvey why he was not privy to the reorganization before it was announced, as perhaps it was necessary to keep it confidential for reasons unbeknownst to Michael.

*And two others had these positive takes on the situation:*

The new role could be a maneuver toward the door or it could be the genesis of a new department. And even if initially structured as a setup to fail, the role can morph into a real promotion. It could also be the start of a test for Harvey, especially if the existing well-oiled machine suddenly throws a rod.

“A new and untested role can be a high-risk move for anyone’s career, especially if some hostility is to be expected from peers.”

It is possible that the president drove this decision with little input from Harvey, seeking Michael as a person he wanted on his team. It could be a great opportunity for Michael to work closely with the president and directly influence the company at the highest level.

*While a third urged caution:*

This seems like a political move by Harvey, as their combination might not be working for him. Michael really needs to think on his feet and carefully judge the situation. His first move should be to understand the role and how much trouble it means for him. A new and untested role can be a high-risk move for anyone’s career, especially if some hostility is to be expected from peers.

Michael should really assess if he is willing to take this risk and then embrace what situation might await him.

*Two respondents noted a potential career trap of which we should all be careful:*

This case study shows how important it is to plan for career-related contingencies. They can cause disruption in living expenses, environment (living and working), and demonstrate how being too inflexible and comfortable in your current role can hurt you.

Sometimes a working relationship gets stale because it is too long in a static mode, no matter how comfortable the work may be.

*Others emphasized the need for clarity:*

### Actuary 1

Strong communication is important. The fact that Harvey did not communicate to Michael about an event as important as a reorganization sends a signal that something is up, and he should confirm by checking

1. His annual performance reviews up to this point, and
2. Current roles and responsibilities.

If Michael is convinced that something is up, then he should consider legal advice or seek employment elsewhere.

### Actuary 2

I would seek clarity on the new role and what that long-term career development path looks like. I would reiterate that I was very interested and excited about the new opportunity, and that I am prepared to handle the changes.

That conversation would be with the president, and depending on our relationship and level of trust, I might also address feeling a bit blindsided by the reorganization. That conversation would also depend on the reason why my relationship with Harvey eroded, and what Harvey’s relationship with the president is like.

*And finally, a road map for moving forward:*

Michael should schedule a meeting with both Harvey and the president, and come prepared with his questions regarding expectations and objectives for the role. Separately, Michael should schedule time with Harvey to get feedback on his performance leading the actuarial department, as well as to ensure Harvey has what he needs regarding the actuarial team.

It sounds like regular and effective communication with Harvey has broken down. Michael should fix that, since he will still work with Harvey as a colleague in his new role, and will need him as supporter and advocate. It’s possible the president’s decision contributed to Harvey pulling back from the relationship. This also provides an opportunity to get Harvey’s views on the new role and potential challenges of reporting directly to the president.

Finally, Michael should make sure his résumé is up-to-date, in case this new situation is some sort of power play or attempt to move him out of the company. If so, Michael also should ensure he has reviewed his actions that may have contributed to the bad situation, and he should consider coaching to help him avoid similar situations in the future.

### WHAT REALLY HAPPENED?

Michael dove into his new role, meeting frequently with the president on expectations. Several months later, he had his answer: The corporate development initiative was dropped, Harvey was let go, and Michael was promoted to chief actuary. ■



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