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How Career Idols Can Help You Get Ahead

“If I have seen further than others, it is by standing on the shoulders of giants.”

– Sir Isaac Newton

If you're lucky, at some point in your career you'll have an opportunity to work alongside someone of enviable competence. You know the type: Their input is sought by everyone, they never commit a professional blunder and they solve the most difficult work challenges with ease. Consider them career idols.

If they weren't so worthy of admiration, it would be easy to begrudge these office stars. After all, they probably occupy a higher position on the career ladder and routinely earn the largest raises. But rather than feeling frustrated or overshadowed in the presence of a professional giant, use your proximity to perfection to your advantage.

If you can uncover what makes these career idols successful, you can apply this knowledge to make your own professional strides. Here are some ways to capitalize on your vantage point:

- **Observe the mundane.** Watching a career idol make a presentation or facilitate a meeting can yield valuable pointers, but some of the most telling clues about what makes someone successful are revealed in everyday work situations. Study small things such as how top performers structure their workday, interact with the managing partner or negotiate more favorable terms with vendors. These commonplace situations often provide the best forums for learning since they are where the transfer of tacit knowledge takes place, what some may consider “learning through osmosis.”
- **Analyze success factors.** Career idols are usually successful for many reasons, not just one. Try to put the various pieces together to get a full picture of why someone excels. It may help to think of the person in terms of a competency model, a human resources tool which describes the knowledge, skills, capabilities and behaviors required to perform a job. If you were to take stock of the hard and soft skills and other attributes of your career idol, what would be on the list? This exercise can help you improve your understanding of the different qualities needed to succeed in your position or work environment.
- **Identify improvement opportunities.** As you analyze the factors behind your career idol's success, you may become more aware of gaps in your own knowledge, skills and experience. For example, maybe you realize that your career idol's financial acumen or interpersonal skills are key factors that set her apart as an administrator. If you find

that you lack comparable expertise, seek out training and development opportunities that will help you close these gaps and advance your career.

- **Emulate desirable behaviors.** The experience of watching a top performer navigate a variety of business situations can provide a mental “what to do” manual. Although sometimes professional stars shine the brightest behind doors – while huddling with senior management, for instance – whenever you have the benefit of observing them in action, take note of behaviors and responses they exhibit that can be called to mind throughout your career. Like most professionals, you’ll probably find yourself wondering at times how you should handle a tough business problem or a difficult colleague. You may only need to recall how your career idol handled a similar situation to formulate an appropriate response.
- **Seek first-hand insight.** Whether you have a close professional relationship with your career idol or more of an arm’s length acquaintance, don’t be reluctant to ask for career advice. Maybe you’re interested in knowing more about your idol’s career path, educational background or how he or she became an expert negotiator. Most accomplished professionals will be flattered by your interest in their career and receptive to discussing their experiences. They probably once gained valuable insights from a career idol themselves.

Working alongside an exceptionally talented colleague is nothing to fear or become demoralized over. In reality, it is a golden opportunity for on-the-job learning. If you can glean insights into what makes these star performers shine, you stand an excellent chance of replicating their success in your own career. Imitation, after all, is the sincerest form of flattery.