

How to Land a 'Stretch' Job

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Illustration: Jon Krause

By
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Smart leaders have a knack for spotting hidden potential in their employees and suggesting jobs to draw it out.

Pushing people into jobs they don't feel qualified for can be a hard sell. It can be just as difficult, however, for employees to sit back and allow the invisible hand of management to chart their careers.

[DowDuPont Inc. Chief Financial Officer Howard Ungerleider](#) wants to advance employees who collaborate with colleagues in different departments and look beyond their own jobs toward improving the company's overall results. Several years ago Beth Nicholas stood out when he visited the chemical giant's Shanghai operations, where she was an accounting director, he says. He watched her give presentations and talked shop with her over dinner.

In 2014, Mr. Ungerleider advocated for Ms. Nicholas's promotion to global finance director for Dow's agricultural-products unit, where she would report to him. The unit posted record earnings last year. He recently offered Ms. Nicholas another stretch assignment, to become the company's chief tax officer, effective in January. The job will require especially strong collaboration skills as the company, formed by the merger last month of Dow Chemical Co. and DuPont Co., [proceeds with a plan to break up](#) into three companies.

Ms. Nicholas lacks credentials common among corporate tax chiefs—a master's or law degree in taxation. Mr. Ungerleider says DowDuPont has other executives with deep expertise in tax law. What he sees in Ms. Nicholas is the ability to collaborate with them on a company-wide goal of improving global tax strategy.

When Mr. Ungerleider offered her the promotion, Ms. Nicholas says, "it was one of those moments where you pause and the tummy turns a little bit." After taking about a week to think it over, she said yes. "You should feel uncomfortable when you take a new job," she says, "because the opportunity to grow is so vast."

Spotting untapped potential is especially important in advancing women, who tend not to apply for jobs they aren't already highly qualified to do. Executive coach Joel Garfinkle of Oakland, Calif., also sees this tendency in "the introvert who may be intimidated by the extroverts around him or her, the talented but shy person who is afraid of self-promotion, or the person of a different race or culture who has been taught not to put himself forward."

Bosses also need to reassure employees: "I care about you, I'll support you with mentoring and coaching, and there's an exciting path forward if you take the stretch assignments and succeed," says Suzanne Bates, a Wellesley, Mass., leadership and executive coach whose firm, Bates Communications, has worked with executives at Dow.

"You've got to be kidding me!" was Jennifer Roseman's response when her boss Dan Frank, chief executive of Three Wire Systems, a Falls Church, Va., government contractor, suggested three years ago that she take over financial management of the unit where she was supervising client-service staff. Ms. Roseman trained as a social worker and had no interest in adding profit-and-loss accounting to her role at the unit, VetAdvisor, she says. She reluctantly agreed.

Mr. Frank, a former Navy pilot, says he trusted Ms. Roseman to learn the job and excel at it. "What I saw in her was somebody who loved the mission" of providing housing, health, career and other support to veterans, he says.

After a few months of managing VetAdvisor's revenue and expenses from her Ebensburg, Pa., office, she realized meeting targets gives her a sense of teamwork and pride. She has since been promoted to executive vice president. Looking back, Ms. Roseman says, "Dan had a knack for understanding what I could do—for seeing things in me that I didn't necessarily see."

People who want to work for a leader who nurtures talent should look for executives who spend time with employees and take an interest in them, asking questions and welcoming honest answers, says Jessica Bigazzi Foster, a

senior partner at the management-psychology consulting firm RHR International in Chicago.

Motivating many, Ms. Foster says, is a desire to pay it forward. When these leaders tell stories about their own careers, “a consistent theme is that somebody took a chance on them and helped them make a significant leap—without checking all the boxes.”

Catherine Zelenkofske was thriving as a program manager at WegoWise Inc., a Boston maker of software for building owners, when tech entrepreneur Laila Partridge became the company’s chief executive last year. Ms. Partridge noticed how smoothly Ms. Zelenkofske worked with others. During her performance review, the CEO asked, “So, what do you like doing?” Ms. Zelenkofske talked about mentoring employees and building customer relationships.

Ms. Zelenkofske was surprised when Ms. Partridge offered her a job she’d never considered, as head of “people ops” or human resources. Ms. Partridge explained that she’d still be doing what she enjoyed, but with all 50 of the company’s employees rather than a smaller team. She promised to provide mentors, training and guidance. Ms. Zelenkofske took the job. In her first nine months, she set up two programs for employees, one to improve the performance-review process and another to help them with career planning.

“She was a good performer on her previous job,” Ms. Partridge says, “but on this one she’s a rock star.”

Work & Family Mailbox

- **Q:** Your column on smarter ways to study was very relevant for my two teens. Did you discover any how-to-study programs to train high-school students? –S.D.
- **A:** School counselors sometimes teach study skills in small groups. Some public libraries or community organizations host presentations by tutoring centers or test-prep experts in their area.

Study-skills training tends to work best when students are motivated to learn, says Ned Johnson, founder of Prep Matters, a Bethesda, Md., test-preparation company. Among helpful books for parents, “The Learning Habit” by Stephanie Donaldson-Pressman, Rebecca Jackson and Robert Pressman describes home practices that are linked in research with students’ academic success. “Smart but Scattered” by Peg Dawson and Richard Guare offers help for improving students’ executive-function skills such as time management. “Learning to Learn” by Gloria Frender covers different learning styles and study skills. Helpful advice for college students can be found in “How to Become a Straight-A student” by Cal Newport.

Many colleges seize on a teaching moment—students’ arrival on campus—to offer freshman seminars on managing time and using campus resources. Students who enroll tend to earn more college credits than those who don’t, research shows.

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