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BEST PRACTICES, CASE STUDIES AND STRATEGY FOR COMMUNICATORS

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**LIZ GUTHRIDGE**

**Sink or swim, but
don't stay on the
shore if you want to
get ahead**

TAKE TO THE WATER FOR CAREER SUCCESS

In order to propel your career to the next level, an element of bravery is required. Liz Guthridge explains why remaining on the shore as an observer is unlikely to help you reach the career heights to which you aspire. Instead, says Guthridge, you have to summon your courage and enter the fast flowing channels of the communication ocean.

If you want to improve your skills and further your career today, you can't stay on the shore, you've got to get into the water.

Consider taking these three actions simultaneously and see if you can effect change as a result.

1. Dive deeply into your industry

Situation: C-suite executives appreciate and expect their communication counselors to know the business as well as their communication specialty.

Your actions: Besides immersing yourself in on-the-job training, take advantage of formal training, such as company classes, industry trade shows, professional meetings, continuing education and technical seminars. Also, join professional associations geared toward your industry. Even if you don't have a formal speakers' bureau at your organization, invite subject-matter experts to your communication staff meetings. You and your staff can learn industry and company specific information while the speaker gets presentation skill practice with a new audience.

Other tips: If you've not been in the job market lately, be prepared that many recruiters prefer talking to potential candidates with industry expertise. If you're contemplating switching jobs, think hard about your commitment to your industry. If you like it, assess the depth of your knowledge and determine if you have any gaps. If you want to switch industries, think how you'll apply

your expertise to a new industry.

2. Swim across lanes

Situation: Your colleagues in other functions, in all likelihood, also count on you having more than a superficial understanding of their area.

You may not be in their "swim lane" in their official process map, but if you're working with them you need to "pass the baton" at some stage. You and your staff members are more valuable if you understand their work, can easily swim between lanes and make the proper and timely hand-offs.

Your actions: Spend time with colleagues in other functions. Ask them not only about their work, but also about what trade publications they read, what professional associations they belong to and what training programs they attend. And consider taking part in one or two that interest you.

For example, my clients include communication professionals, as well as HR and IT leaders. As well as belonging to the usual suspects of professional associations (IABC, PRSA and CCM [Council of Communication Management]), I'm a member of SHRM and the Organization Design Forum. I



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Other tips: Consider job rotations, if not for you, then for your staff members. A three to six month assignment in another department, either communication-related or sales, HR or IT can be very mind-expanding for the individual as well as the department that's hosting the individual. Many organizations are so committed to their silos and the status quo that they often don't think about job rotations as a low-cost, high-benefit way to train and retain key staff members.

3. Play in water fountains

Situation: Other worlds besides business and the communication profession can offer ideas as well as introduce you to a broader network. You'll also improve your peripheral vision, which is critical these days. For example, Mark Parker, CEO of Nike, turns to interior design, cuisine, art and music for inspiration. He consults his global network of friends and associates for tips on who can help him maintain Nike's standing as the "influencers of influencers," as recently reported by the *Wall Street Journal*.

Your actions: Follow your interests and passions. Track experts and trend-setters who are pushing the boundaries in those areas. Also take time to seek out diverse friends and associates with whom you can discuss a range of topics and participate in different activities.

Other tips: Be focused first on enjoyment rather than career advancement. The more open and curious you are, the more you can learn and make connections. And be sure to ask for help and introductions.

Reap the rewards

The benefits from these three actions can help you regain your energy, give you new perspectives and equip you with new skills that will help you in your current role or in any new challenge you want to take on next. And remember, you can't just wade in. Jump and be buoyant!