

Right and wrong ways to climb the ladder

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Everyone has known at least one in his or her career. Neatly pressed suit, the perfect tie. During the interview he talks of how he wants to prove himself, to show the company what he can do; he doesn't care about the title, prestige or authority level; he's a selfless worker looking to make an honest buck while making the boss shine. Only later do you find out that under that carefully coifed veneer lurks . . . a climber.

A member of the "stalk-and-ambush predator" family, these climbers are ever vigilant of their prey and the role they could assume in the company if only the incumbent would be fired, quit or simply died a slow death. Their overly confident, overly aggressive tone is offensive to others, typically resulting in early ostracizing by other members of the pack or work group. Inasmuch as they feel obliged to toy with their prey, they may participate in meetings and collaborative efforts while plotting to outsmart and outplay others around them.

And the result? Well, I think we all know. As managers, we find climbers irritating in an otherwise calm work group dynamic. Typically, employees are hired to serve a need; a climber creates more work for the manager who has to smooth the feathers of his employees in the wake of the latest climber upheaval.

Why do I tell this grim tale of the hunter and hunted? To remind you, Generation X, that in order to climb you must use your hands, feet, head and heart. Merely using one on that list will get you nowhere.

To climb the company ladder you must use your manners — remember manners, Generation X? You have to, even when it means biting your tongue and honoring the talent and history of those around you. To bring about change, change that involves you as a key player, is a process of unfolding the past while creating a vision for the future. It doesn't involve throwing a bomb into the middle of what is being done as a way to "shake things up;" those who have been toiling away won't take kindly to that and neither will managers who don't have the time for feather smoothing.

It's hard to walk the line. However, you must find the line between getting your point across and being a jerk. Find that line early and respect it so you can assimilate and then later effect change by leveraging the respect and trust you have earned from those around you. You don't earn respect just because of the skills listed on your resume or an impressive list of references. These superficial props are not enough to earn a seat at the table. It is what you do today that defines you.

So, Gen X, resist the urge to bare those shiny MBA teeth when asked for your opinion on an idea. Instead, ask how it's been done in the past and then really listen and find a way to impart your wisdom without making others look like a tarnished penny next to a silver dollar. For you may very well be a silver dollar and the guy across you might be a tarnished penny, but he's the one in the job you want and crusty pennies can still be used to buy candy bars last I checked.

NextGen Workbytes is written locally by and for Gen Xers learning the realities of the workplace. Bettyjo H. Bouchey is vice president of campus operations at Empire Education Corp. in Albany, and is involved with a local young professionals' group.

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