

An Inside Job: From Entrepreneur to Corporate Insider and What I Learned

How to get on the same page AND write your own book

I spent the majority of my professional life as an entrepreneur, operating my own consulting practice for nearly 20 years before accepting a senior level position at a premier community bank in the U.S. I had been considering a new experience that would challenge me and ensure professional growth. I found it almost by accident. I began consulting with the bank and got to know the organization. I admired their work, was excited about their goals. When I was invited to join the senior team and lead the communications group, I said yes, held my breath, and jumped.

It was one of the scariest and most exciting things I ever did. Scariest because I was moving away from everything I thought I loved about being in business for myself: diverse projects; freedom and flexibility; independence. Exciting because it was a first-time experience for me. At the tender age of 48, I had never worked full time in a corporate environment, so this opportunity promised new challenges along with the chance to gain a perspective from the inside, rather than the typical outside-in consultant's point of view.

It meant doing some of the basics I had avoided for years -- like dressing up in a business suit each day, fighting traffic to and from the office, and managing all the personalities and politics on a daily basis.

Six years after this grand adventure, I have returned to my consulting practice with a newfound perspective. These insider lessons I learned might be valuable for others. They apply to anyone starting a new job or career as they discover how to integrate, fit in, and make the new relationship work. So here is my "big eight" list: how to get on the same page as your new company while still managing to write your own book.

*** Be a sponge.**

One of the most respectful things you can do when joining a new organization is to learn everything you can about it. Become a student of the company. Resist the tendency to make your mark immediately and show your stuff. Instead, exhibit a humble attitude that communicates to others that YOU have a lot to learn from THEM.

*** Ask "dumb" questions.**

While soaking up all there is to learn about your new organization, don't be afraid to ask "dumb" or naïve questions. There is true value in being a beginner. Your

fresh set of eyes and untainted perspective might help your new organization reevaluate a process or practice to gain efficiencies and heighten effectiveness.

*** Partner for change.**

Demonstrate your willingness to form alliances to get things done. Avoid the "bull in a china shop" syndrome where you attempt to exercise your talents and skills by going after change alone. Instead, let team members know that you want and need their support to make the needed changes to move the organization forward. Reach out to individuals in different departments who have a stake in the process and include them as well.

*** Socialize ideas.**

Never underestimate the value of gaining consensus by sharing or "socializing" your ideas in advance of any formal announcements. Choose who your influencers are, and take them out for coffee or lunch to air your ideas and get their feedback. You'll gain insight about how to tweak your idea, make a course correction, or better position your proposal for success. In addition, if your colleague is supportive, you will add another person to your list of advocates, supporters, and cheerleaders. It makes for stronger results when as many people as possible feel like "insiders" to the process.

*** Share Success.**

Make heroes of your colleagues. In the battle for recognition, don't be stingy with your praise. Talk up how your team members contributed to the success of any project. You will be remembered far more positively for your generosity and acknowledgement of others rather than for garnering the praise for yourself. It will also establish you as an effective leader who understands that any accomplishment requires many players.

*** Continually Connect the Dots.**

Pay close attention to how your efforts and priorities align themselves to the bigger organizational goals. Always identify a clear line of sight between what you are working on and the company's mission. Any performance review is enhanced by your ability to link your efforts to bigger goals. You will also foster greater buy-in from team members when this connection is evident. Who doesn't want to be a part of the team effort to score a touchdown?

*** Be an Energy Catalyst.**

We spend too much time in the workplace for it not to be a fun and engaging experience. We are drawn to people who know how to get the job done while still having fun. Aim to be the kind of person others want to "plug into" for a jolt of energy and enthusiasm. We love to work with people who love their work and can make it a memorable experience.

***Finally, perhaps most important: Don't Conform, Contribute.**

When I went from being an entrepreneur to a corporate insider, it felt completely foreign to me. Initially I felt I needed to conform and be more like people around me and less like myself. I quickly realized that was not going to work. I was cheating both my colleagues and myself. Remember that you are hired because of who you are, that you come to your work environment with your unique perspective, knowledge, skills and talents. Contribute all of who you are and what you bring to the table. This will make you stand out and be memorable.

Essentially, I learned that the "soft stuff" is often the hard stuff in this journey to be an engaged, committed, and highly contributing member of a team and organization. It is a delicate balance to get on the same page while still being the author of your own book. Delicate, yes, and decidedly worthwhile. Good luck in your journey.