

Corporate savvy - What you need to know to climb the corporate ladder

By  Jeff Lomey

15 May 2020

Savvy is the term used to describe shrewdness and practical knowledge or another definition is the ability to make good judgments. An example is: "She had enough corporate savvy to figure out how to get ahead in her career."



Source: www.pexels.com

If life were simple then an organisation would be perfect. Perfect means that whatever the organisation says it will do, it does. Perfect means that whatever it says are its values are its values. There are many more examples. We all know that in reality, perfection is not reached. The difference between what is said and what is done is where corporate savvy fits in.

Drivers and navigators who race cross country sometimes go from A to B by just heading on the right path on the map, as fast as possible, and solving problems along the way as they appear. Those who are savvy know the map, the territory or the actual layout on the ground, the danger zones and the best ways to get there first.

Corporate savvy is the ability to read between the lines and figure out the unspoken and unwritten rules of career advancement or any other corporate "game in play". Organisations have what is called the espoused organisation which is strived for and the shadow organisation which is often what customers and employees experience. An executive who is savvy will know how to navigate these hidden paths and players.

Career advancement is like a cross country car race. The right knowledge, skills, experience, attitude and timing are all very important. However, in addition, we need corporate savvy to navigate the espoused and shadow organisation and other dynamics which affect who is chosen to advance. Put another way, it's not what you know but who you know. There are two aspects to consider and these are the pathways and players.

Pathways

In order to advance up the career ladder, we need to know the pathways to get to the next level or levels.

- **Espoused organisation:** High flyer identification and development processes. These pathways, when formal, are usually based on track record, personality and skills testing, boss recommendations and perceived potential to add value.
- **Shadow organisation:** These pathways may and often do also take place informally through the “old boys or girls network” or some other set of conscious or unconscious hidden criteria in the culture.

Key questions to ask:

- Which one of these, espoused or shadow, is most powerful in your organisation?
- How do people get noticed and tagged for promotion?
- What are the criteria for advancement and how are they set?
- Are these pathways to the next level consciously or unconsciously designed by the leadership?
- What are the espoused criteria and the shadow criteria? Are they the same?

Players

We also need to know who the players in the advancement game are.

- **Espoused organisation:** The major players in a formal structure are often the C suite executives (CEO CFO CIO etc.), the Human Resources department and any technical and leadership assessment advisors. There may be committees and formal application processes in larger organisations.
- **Shadow organisation:** There are leaders and advisors whose opinions are trusted even though they are not in the formal decision-making process. Like a really old-timer who has been around for decades and has the ear of the CEO. Or “spies and grapevine” on the ground who pass on their views.

Key questions to ask:

- Who is highly influential in the C-suite decision-making circles?

- Is there a pattern of decision making regarding advancement?
- Who controls the flow of initially selected talent to the top?
- Who decides the process to promotion as espoused and as actually happens?
- Who historically has been on target with predictions about who will rise up?

It would be helpful to unpack and apply these questions for a specific advancement situation. A professional coach or someone who has corporate experience can help draw up a physical map showing the pathways, players and dynamics for career progression in your company. When there is sufficient understanding of the situation, meaningful strategies to influence the decision are defined.

So tap into corporate savvy, map out the pathways and players and get new insights on career advancement.

ABOUT JEFF LOMEY

Jeff Lomey is an executive business coach specialising in Strategy-in-Action. He is also the founder of Jeff Lomey Associates, a niche consultancy with expertise in executive coaching and strategy execution

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