INTRODUCTION

Get the Boost You Need

HAVE YOU BEEN WORKING YOUR BUTT OFF, yet you never receive that promotion, recognition, or pay raise you crave? Maybe you go in early, stay late, and have dedicated years to doing your best. Perhaps you’re just starting out in a new position and want to seize every chance to succeed. If you want to launch into the next level of your career, this book is for you.

Don’t be the person who works hard but isn’t considered leader material. Don’t let the corporate culture stand in your way. Don’t give in to departmental angst or watch your coworkers “magically” become the go-to gal or guy instead of you. Yes, skilled people get overlooked in the workplace. Talented people get ignored. Heck, even ambitious people stagnate. If you want to be the one they send in to throw the Hail Mary pass, even the one to call the play, you need to demonstrate that you can do it. You do that by focusing on the right things.

I guarantee you, there are untapped opportunities in your company. Being able to identify those opportunities is what makes all the difference. This isn’t just about working harder—it’s about working smarter. To make a resounding impact in an organization, you need to immediately elevate executives’ perceptions of you and you need to know what type of work gets noticed.
During the past fifty years, I’ve worked as a corporate marketing head, advertising agency CEO, and C-suite consultant. I founded and grew a successful marketing and sales business that advises executives in a variety of capacities. My coauthor and wife, Mechele Flaum, has worked in marketing for almost forty years consulting with leading organizations in a variety of industries. She founded and manages her own firm that advises clients on marketing strategy and consumer trends.

Through working with many hundreds of people in Fortune 500, established, and entrepreneurial organizations, we’ve seen many careers soar while others fizzle out. What most often separates these people isn’t intelligence or drive—it is the ability to successfully navigate workplace culture, build the right relationships, and get noticed for doing things that matter to stakeholders.

Time and time again, we’ve seen this hold true. It became clear to us that there was a need to state the modern-day, unwritten rules for getting ahead. Impress ing the right people and getting noticed are essential in today’s workplace, where employees are judged in real time. This book will help you transform how you work, while changing key players’ perceptions of your capabilities.

**Set Your Destination**

You may have picked up this book knowing specifically what you want to achieve. You may have your future title, responsibilities, or salary number in mind. Or you may vaguely know you want something different, better, more respected, more valued in your organization. It’s essential to enter the journey that this book will take you on by clarifying your personal and professional goals. So take the time now to write them down somewhere.

After writing down the more surface aspect, like a raise or promotion, drill deep. We want to challenge you to think about why you want these things. What is your emotional investment
in achieving this? What satisfaction will it give you on a deep, inner level? For example, you may ultimately want a promotion to team lead. On an inner level, you want to earn this through your exemplary performance. If so, your goals need to include demonstrating your passion for the company’s mission, exhibiting your specialized skills, and doing so in a way that inspires others.

Clarifying your desired outcomes in this way, from the get-go, will make it much easier to understand the types of relationships and projects that will help you reach your goals. You can refer to these goals as you absorb the advice in this book and apply it directly to achieving them. Later in your journey, you’ll also be better able to measure your accomplishments and impact.

**NEW RULES FOR A NEW WORKPLACE**

If you’re like many people today, you feel confused about how to boost your career because the status quo has changed. The working world is in constant flux. Rules from forty, twenty, and even ten years ago don’t apply today. So your father’s advice won’t translate. Even the things that worked for your big sister may not be relevant any more. And if you’re trying to apply the same strategy that you got you where you are today, you’re not likely to reach the next rung. The world changes in a blink, and how we work also changes. That’s why we need to stay dynamic.

It’s hard to see things evolve in real time, but with an opportunity to step back and compare, the differences are vast. Mechele saves good business articles, and she has an impressive collection that goes back many years. Flipping through those pieces is like opening a time capsule, and it gives us the chance to see business dynamism at play. One twenty-year-old article about how young people don’t prepare properly for job interviews featured the story of a recent college grad who applied for an entry-level job at a
national cookie company. The hopeful hire came up with a new concept for a cookie, baked some at home, and brought them to the interview. The managers who interviewed her were appalled. Without permission or knowing the machinery, process, or legal issues about product liability, she had the audacity to bring a home-baked, “improved” version of their product to an interview. This was an example of what not to do.

That was twenty years ago. If she had brought that plateful of cookies to an interview today, she’d have the job. Hiring managers would commend her creativity, problem-solving, proactive approach, appetite for taking smart risks, and knowledge of what it takes to bake. She would stand memorably apart from cookieless contenders. This shows how the value for entrepreneurial drive and ingenuity has shifted in a notable way, and how employees are judged differently today than they were in the past. With new technology and new generations in the workplace, getting ahead requires an ever-fresh state of mind. This book will show you how to stay alert for opportunities, no matter what the future holds.

YOU’RE THE BEST ADVANTAGE YOU HAVE

It’s up to you to take the reins to getting ahead. And it requires urgency. Because if you’re not busy building the career you crave, you’ve probably settled into a ditch where promotion is unlikely. If you’re stagnant, plodding along in the same role you were initially hired into the company for, haven’t been bumped up to higher positions, and get ignored when more responsibilities are being divvied, those are signs that you are not ready to be recognized and moved up. You have work to do, because the hard truth is that it’s not up to your managers to recognize your potential—it’s up to you to show them what you’ve got.

It’s common for high-risers to shoot up fast. This may have even happened to you: you landed an entry-level position and immediately stood out as a future star. Within a year, or even more
quickly, you were bumped up to the next level or received feedback that you’re on the way up. This continued until, inevitably, two rising stars were competing for the same slot. Then someone got the short straw, possibly for the first time in his or her life. If this happened to you, it’s a shock. And it hurts.

Both of these situations are challenging but not impossible to fix. The answer lies in you. You are the best advantage you have. It is your responsibility to show why you are a winner, a “must keep,” even a secret weapon for your organization. You won’t win points for putting in your time, doing the work that is assigned to you, and hoping someone notices. That strategy may have worked years ago, but today, that mentality makes employees average at best. It’s time to think and act big! In these pages, you will find many ways to prove you belong in bigger shoes.

REAL-TIME PERFORMANCE EVALUATIONS
Being watched and measured by your company isn’t creepy when you make it work for you. Organizations and managers used to give employees time to prove themselves, but you no longer have the luxury of pursuing success at a leisurely pace. Yearly performance reviews were once standard, but companies are beginning to think they are antiquated. So many things change in the course of a year, and annually conducting lengthy reviews is a burden and time suck for everyone. Organizations, in a variety of industries, are switching to biannual or quarterly reviews. Some are even doing away with formal performance reviews altogether and are instead evaluating employees on a continuous basis—in real time.

New software makes it possible for companies to monitor employees’ successes through a variety of metrics. For example, Kimberly-Clark is a company known to employ lifelong workers. Now it is using a cloud-based system that gives employees personalized, data-backed goals, then tracks their progress and the amount of time it takes to meet the goal. Executives are using this
as a tool for “managing out the deadwood”: the employees who are not constantly showing improved metrics. This change has resulted in doubling the combined voluntary and forced turnover rate in the past ten years.¹

This type of technology also makes it easy to draw comparisons between employees, which is creating more competitive working environments. Such systems are still in the early adoption phase, but trust me, they are on the horizon and just one aspect of the trend to ask “What have you done for me lately?” In this new normal, it’s essential to not only be productive but to be productive in the ways that matter.

THE THINGS THAT MATTER TO THE PEOPLE WHO MATTER
The working world is complex—priorities vary between companies, departments, and individual managers. Employees do receive a fair amount of direction about what the large-scale priorities are. They know the company’s values, its product or service, and the competitive advantage they need to uphold. Beyond that, it’s up to you to decipher. Your boss wants you to deliver on what you were hired to do, but what’s truly important to your boss? Does she want a collaborative, think-tank-style team? Maybe she needs efficiency and quick turnarounds. Perhaps she needs the next big idea to take upward. Or she could use some help slimming the departmental budget. That’s for you to find out, and when you do, it can make all the difference.

Your boss is just one example of how navigating the work environment depends on connecting with the people who are most influential to your success and understanding what drives them. These motivational factors aren’t written anywhere, so the only ways to figure them out are through talking to people, listening to what they say and applying it, or trial and error. If you’re lucky,
people will be candid about their personal likes and dislikes. “I’m a stickler for organization.” Or a colleague might give you a helpful heads-up: “Mr. Thompson loves it when people are self-propelled executers, so be sure to put together a meeting agenda and email it to everyone two days before.” This type of information is crucial for getting ahead because it shows how Mr. Thompson, a stakeholder in your career advancement, views success. You might consider yourself organized, but after learning how much he values this trait, your mission is to make those skills shine. On the flip side, you also know a quick way to irritate him—so at the very least pull together that agenda. At the most, see his preference as an opportunity to hold the most productive meeting possible and include clear-as-a-bell talking points so invitees can be even better prepared.

Little nuggets like this draw executive attention. They empower you with information that helps you adapt your work style in ways that could prove vital to your success. Before you started working with Mr. Thompson’s team, maybe you didn’t see the value in creating meeting agendas and sharing them in advance. Maybe you didn’t even think of doing it. But now you not only know that your time is well spent because it’s important to Mr. Thompson, but you also see why it’s important to him. As you continue to work with him, your organizational skills can be the advantage that builds your relationship. He will trust you because you make his job easier.

Whether Mr. Thompson is your manager, client, or CEO, if he’s in your corner you have a better shot at advancement. The reason? You are building an all-important emotional connection—a key factor in boosting your career. With all of this in mind, you can see how delivering the things that matter to the people who matter is essential. Throughout this book, we will offer tips for reaching out in ways that benefit everyone, especially you.
PUT RELATIONSHIPS AT THE CORE OF YOUR EFFORTS

Faith Popcorn, an industry-leading futurist, says that the importance of cultivating professional relationships is a trend that’s here to stay. When she lectured to my MBA leadership course at the Fordham Gabelli Graduate School of Business, she said, “There’s a wonderful expression: It’s not what you know, it’s who you know. I want to tell you that it’s so true.” She told the class that while knowledge and education are definitely crucial for success, we should never downplay the power of relationships. “The likability factor is important in business. It matters how much people like you. Not because you’re sucking up to them, but because you go out of your way for them and you are authentic.” Popcorn has again and again demonstrated her ability to predict movements in the business world, including the things that are evergreen. She also happens to be Mechele’s sister.

The thing is, it’s really hard to teach anyone how to build relationships and improve likability. But since you are avid about boosting your career, know this: you need to emphasize relationships and likeability as the most important work you can do—because you are almost always doing work for somebody. You need to build strong emotional connections with your coworkers, manager, executives, teams in other departments, or even a group working on the other side of the world. If other people have that connection and you don’t, you will watch them fly right by you. That’s why this book is packed with advice for developing positive interpersonal exchanges.

At the heart of all your efforts to boost your career is emotional intelligence, known as EQ. This is the ability to recognize your own emotions and other people’s emotions—and then use that information to guide your thinking and doing. Psychologist and author Daniel Goleman developed this quotient as a skill that can be honed.
Your EQ is measured by five key competencies: self-awareness, self-regulation, social skill, empathy, and motivation. To excel in these areas is to have a high EQ, which studies have linked to a variety of career-boosting outcomes, including better relationships at work and being perceived more positively by others. Fortunately, all of the EQ competencies are skills that can be developed with hard work, training, reflection, and candid feedback. By improving your EQ, you will better understand yourself and everyone around you. This empowers you to cultivate emotional connections with people much more easily—especially those who have a different work style than you, who value things you never considered, and who do things in ways that previously baffled you. Because we work so collaboratively today, developing this skillset is essential and provides the foundation for all the relationship advice in this book.

Having high EQ leads to insights like this one, which addresses how to navigate politics in a workplace where competition is unavoidable. Dr. Cameron Durrant, chairman and CEO of KaloBios, shared some great advice with me and the class on keeping the right state of mind. “Sometimes politicking happens because people think, ‘Okay, the pie is only this big. More for you is less for me.’ A better perspective is, ‘How do we collectively bake a bigger pie, so more for me is more for you as well?!”

This is the basic mindset that you need to keep in all your efforts to boost your career. You don’t need to bring other people down to bring yourself up. Instead, base everything on the belief that getting ahead is about making other people look good, whether they’re your clients, your boss, or your direct reports. We’ll get really specific about ways to do this in chapter 2, “Fuel Up with the Support You Need.” The paradox of success is that you get ahead by never making it about you—and always making it about them. Creating value for others is how you show your own value.
DRAW ON YOUR VARIETY
While working with others’ benefits in mind may be a simple theory, putting it into action can be tricky. How do you identify what your colleagues and clients will find valuable? We will delve into that topic in the following chapters, but it’s important to know up front that providing long-term value to a variety of people means broadening your knowledge, experience, and skillset. A recent study found that gaining experience in different business functions greatly increases the likelihood of obtaining an executive position. For example, a person who works in project management for years has a lower chance of becoming a top executive than someone who worked in project management but also spent time in another department, like IT or sales. The study found that experience “in one additional functional area improved a person’s odds of becoming a senior executive as much as three years of experience.” The findings also support the value in lateral career moves as part of moving along the corporate ladder, which may be important to you if your goal is to move into another department.

In your efforts to do the right type of work to boost your career, a little variety goes a long way. When you bring in the relationship view of our working reality, it makes sense that having experience in a range of skillsets means that you can better help any effort and impact more people.

ZERO IN ON PROJECTS THAT ARE VALUED
The best way to get recognized and build your career is to lead meaningful projects. We spoke with many successful professionals in a variety of fields to find out what they did that helped them get where they are today. We took the best ideas that are proven to make a difference and created a whole chapter of sample projects you can lead. Each of the eighteen projects in chapter 3, “Project Ideas to Spark Your Ignition,” includes a rundown of what it’s all
about, including the benefits, examples of when it's a smart choice, the work required on your end, and more.

After we cover the basics of identifying the right type of work, we’ll help you put this knowledge into action. We’ll tell you how to create powerful narratives about your accomplishments that fix positive impressions in place—no matter what happened along the way. Then, as you approach your new stratum—your goal—and are in that critical moment when you could either fall back into the same old or achieve the outcome you want, we’ll help you align with the big picture. Because companies are complex, multifaceted, and strategic, you need to know how to get in sync with what the next level up requires.

By applying the advice in this book, you can propel your career into the stratum you crave to be in. This is because what you do depends entirely on where you put your focus. As we go, these key areas will become progressively clearer. While getting to the next level is one thing, getting to your ultimate destination is another. We have designed this journey so that you can apply it over and over again as you navigate your career.

Collectively, your efforts and successes will build on each other until you have not only reached your destination but are thriving in it, excelling in it, and you are ready for yet another boost. This book is a guide to getting there—wherever that may be—every time you wish to launch again.