



## Career Planning

By Bill Gaffney

**Q: I am a sales director for a privately held manufacturing firm with a little over \$100 million in revenue. I have two sales managers, each with 5 sales people, reporting to me as well as the manufacturers' rep organization. I enjoy my job and the company I work for. But how do I advance my career?**

**A:** The first thing you need to do is define where it is you want to go. Is it senior management, a larger sales organization, your own firm, etc? Remember a goal without a plan is a dream and a plan without a goal is a Chinese Fire Drill.

Many sales and sales management people never want to leave sales. It is typically where the most money and least headaches are found. In fact I often have sales management (sometimes senior) people come to me and want to go back to "carrying a bag". They don't want the hassles of management and constant fire drills any more plus the very good ones usually make more money carrying a bag. I am assuming you are talking positions beyond [sales management](#). So that is how I will proceed.

After deciding where you want to end up position wise what type of company do you want to work for? Do you want to stay private or go with a public corporation? There are pluses and minuses in each. The biggest minus in many private companies, especially if they are family owned, is the glass ceiling. Seldom will you get to the executive ranks. In a public company the biggest drawback I see is most of the time they are very reactionary (to Wall Street) and not very attuned to long term planning.

You also have to decide "industries" (Can you easily move from one to the other?), size (Typically the smaller the more entrepreneurial.), location and many other variables, which you can figure out.

Let me briefly say something about location or geography. If you do not want to move you have to be realistic about what you can accomplish. For instance if you are in Chicago, or even much smaller city, and you want to move up the ranks in the banking industry that is not necessarily the place to be. You just have to be realistic.

Next, how broad is your career experience in different disciplines (i.e. [sales](#), marketing, operations)? If you can't

do a fantastic functional resume then you probably need to expand the functions or disciplines you have worked (more than 2 minutes) within. I would say you need a minimum of three strong functions that would include from the following list: sales, marketing, operations, finance, engineering, IT, etc.

Define the time frame. It does not matter if it might be too aggressive. It will just be a starting point.

Now it is time to get a mentor. This could be a company hired internal coach, an external coach, a mentor in senior management in your company or another, etc. Hopefully they will have some personal experience similar to what you are about to start.

The mentor/coach is the main person you are going to talk with about your ideas, thoughts, direction, plans, etc. They should be someone who is open to listening as well as someone who is not afraid to tell you that you need to go find your thought process because you left it somewhere. They are the one you can also use to hold you accountable. This, in my opinion, is very valuable.

Once your mentor is lined up, it is time to start reviewing what you have already thought about and written down, including the time frame. They should be able to help you amend things where they need to be amended. They will also be the one to help you put your plan into action. Here are some additional things you will need to be looking at:

- Based on where your goal puts you, decide which additional functional areas are most critical.
- What additional training, courses, personal [development](#), outside your employer, do you need to do? Start doing it. It is nice if your employer will pay for a lot or all of this but sometimes that is just not going to happen. Remember this is about your development not your employers. So be ready to do what you need to do. One suggestion, if your company is hesitant to pay



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for any personal development, offer to do a "training contract" with them. This is simply a contract that says if they pay for some or all of your development you will be willing to stay with the company for a minimum amount of time. If you leave before you owe them the money back.

- What is there in your background that shows some skills in other functional areas you may have forgotten about or minimized? Start documenting them.
- Do not get hung up on titles. They are a dime a dozen. Any good manager looks past titles and looks at span of responsibility. It is always amazing to me how someone called a Director of Product [Marketing](#) or Management in a \$30 million company thinks they are qualified for the same title in a multi-billion dollar company.
- Look very realistically at your "personal development" plans and tools. Be objective in analyzing them. Are they really going to assist you in getting to your goal? I will provide an example. I had a client a number of years ago who was a sales and sales management superstar wherever he had been. The industry did not matter. He had also owned a small but successful

company when he was in college. His goal was either to have his own company or be [general manager](#)/CEO for the absentee owner of a private firm. He started talking to me about an MBA. I asked him what benefit that would provide in either case. I told him that he would be better off getting much more "real life" functional experience.

- Many business executives do part time teaching in 2 year or 4 years school. If you think a relationship with them would be valuable, take the class. They will get to know you and you will get to know them.

There is a lot more that needs to be said on this subject but this is a good starting point. I will conclude by reemphasizing what I consider the two most critical ideas. Set your goal, develop the plan, and get a mentor/coach.

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