

An illustration featuring three stylized figures climbing white ladders against a vibrant blue background with white clouds. On the left, a man in a black suit and hat is climbing a ladder that is angled towards the center. In the middle, a woman in a black dress is jumping or running towards a ladder that is angled away from the center. On the right, another woman in a black dress is climbing a ladder that is angled towards the center. The ladders are white with black rungs. The overall style is modern and graphic.

For one procurement  
vice president, her rise  
to the executive ranks was  
all about answering the  
door when opportunity  
knocked — no matter how  
unfamiliar it looked.

# Advice From the C-Suite

By Stacey Taylor

**T**he other day, I had an interesting conversation with my 12-year-old son. He said, “Mom, how did you get to be a vice president?” When I asked why he wanted to know, he said he might want to be one, too, someday.

I thought for a moment before answering: “I had to go to college, work hard, get the right opportunities and have a bit of luck.” He wanted to know more about the “right opportunities” part — How do you find them? Where do you look? Do others help you? It made me think.

## When Opportunity Knocks ...

As an 18-year-old high-school graduate, I wanted to work full-time the summer before my freshman year at college so I could sock away enough money to not have to work — at least for the first semester.

A temp agency placed me at a local electronic systems company as a purchasing assistant. I gave my notice two weeks before college started. Soon after, our corporate controller called me in to his office. “Your job isn’t really a temporary job,” he said. “It’s full-time, and we’d like for you to stay on.” He told me about the company’s tuition reimbursement program, which would pay for two classes per semester, books and fees if I stayed on at the company.

The school I’d enrolled in was an hour’s drive, after work, and I wouldn’t make it in time for class. However, two of my closest friends were enrolled at a nearby private college and said I should check it out — only a 15-minute drive.

I applied, and my hard work in school paid off. Based on my grades and SAT scores, I was awarded a scholarship for one class per semester. Now, I was looking at a full-time job, and college was 75 percent paid-for. I gladly stayed on with the company.

Seizing this opportunity was a leap of faith.

Although it took a lot of courage to sign up for a full-time job and full-time night school, going to college in the evenings presented another, unexpected opportunity: the chance to network with seasoned working professionals.

For example, I went to school with a paralegal pursuing a law degree. We became close friends, and I learned how lawyers really work compared with how they’re portrayed on television. He coached me through two legal scenarios. In the first, the brand-new vehicle I’d bought had been in the repair shop 20 times in a six-month period. New York had implemented a “lemon law” the year before, and he coached me through my documentation and arbitration presentation. I won and was refunded all my deposit money.

In the second scenario, I’d been injured due to lack of safety protocol at a construction site. The firm where my friend worked as a paralegal represented me for a nominal fee. I obtained a small settlement and got my medical bills paid as a result.

All this demonstrated the value of developing networks you can tap and leverage to provide assistance when you may not know where else to turn.

## Be Receptive to Advice

Two years into the pursuit of my degree, I moved to a larger company — a worldwide supplier of mobile data capture and delivery equipment — where I met the first boss who’d serve as my mentor. He took a great deal of interest in my career aspirations and was always available for guidance. He also recognized my hard work: I was promoted three times in three years while I worked for him, moving from expeditor to buyer.

Having a mentor allowed me to vet ideas, thoughts, ambitions and insights without feeling as though anything I said could be negatively construed. It really

allowed me to get creative and push myself past any self-imposed limitations.

During my time with that organization, I took on a customer marketing role, much to my boss/mentor's dismay. He highly discouraged me from moving in that direction, but it seemed like a good idea at the time.

As it turns out, the role required a totally different skill set — supporting customer needs — but the individual I worked for provided no training or guidance. After six months in that position, I left the company. I couldn't get support to be successful, no matter how often I asked. In this case, I realized that moving on was the best option.

Looking back, I should have engaged an independent mentor, or leveraged my human resources partner, to help guide me through this dilemma. As your career progresses, it's critical to have partners who have a vested stake in your interests — as much as you do — who can provide insight and support. There's no need to go it alone.

Where to start? Often, an easy way is to approach your human resources team. Ask if the company has a mentoring program in place, or if there are executives who routinely allocate their time to these types of relationships.

Another good place to begin is with your own boss. After a while, he or she gets to know you pretty well and can often suggest a good mentoring fit.

### **Sometimes, Leadership Is Self-Taught**

For five years after I left that job, I worked for a small, family-owned company. Then, I ended up at a major healthcare provider as a category manager after answering an ad in the *Boston Globe*.

In the eight years I spent in procurement at this organization, I had to champion quite a few accomplishments on my own — my training, my increased role responsibility, learning how to manage others and figuring out how to be a leader who was respected and supported by my staff.

At this point in my career, there wasn't a clear opportunity for me to leverage partners or mentors. I was, however, able to draw upon the wonderful relationships I'd built in the past to forge my own path.

Self-taught leadership was tough, but worth it. It required me to be forthright in asking for responsibility and opportunities which, had I not, would have been awarded elsewhere. That experience truly pushed me to take initiative, and to work out my own perception of what good leadership looks like — which ultimately led me to my next, even higher-level opportunity. When a new CPO joined the parent

organization, I asked him for a job, on his corporate team, as he was building his new team. I moved into a director role, with expanded global accountability.

No one can toot your horn as loudly as you can. When you want opportunity, you must let it be known.

### **Embrace Unfamiliar Terrain**

After two years, the parent company was divided into three separate organizations. I knew it would take me at least a year to separate all the deals I'd just spent two years making. Sensing my frustration, a colleague referred me to a recruiter who was looking to place a vice president at ConAgra in Omaha, Nebraska, to start an indirect sourcing team. It represented another crossroad.

I'd worked for the recently segmented company for 10 years and loved my job — but an opportunity on my to-be-accomplished career list knocked. I secured an interview, and the rest, as they say, is history.

In my five years with ConAgra, I have played two major roles. In one, I built an indirect team from scratch and initiated brand-new programs, including online travel management and sourcing (for first time ever within ConAgra), marketing services and human resources benefits. I spent three years building this team and developing key relationships with our internal partners, after which I was offered the opportunity to lead our ingredients team in the direct materials space. In this capacity — in addition to being responsible for our direct material spend — I'd work on key initiatives: SAP, sustainability and the development of supplier food safety and quality programs.

As I transitioned to a new industry and into a new role, the skills I'd developed in the areas of leadership, strategic thinking and project management drastically offset my lack of experience in the food industry prior to joining ConAgra. To shorten my learning curve, I was able to leverage these key skills from previous roles and also grow through learning from my team and other key internal partners.

### **Be Selective, but Open**

Throughout my evolution to a vice presidential position, I was reminded of the importance of being selective — but also open — to new career opportunities in procurement. Although not every opportunity that presents itself will be worth walking through the door, it's always worth answering the knock. **ISM**

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