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Making Yourself Indispensable

By EILENE ZIMMERMAN FEB. 13, 2010

Q. *Your company went through layoffs and you survived, but you want to do more than just hold on. How can you make yourself more valuable to your company and improve your chances of a future promotion?*

A. You can enhance your odds of promotion by suggesting ways to solve problems, taking the initiative on projects, sharpening your skills and showing a willingness to help others.

Find ways that the company can earn more money and spend less, said Larry Myler, chief executive of the consulting firm More or Less Inc. in Provo, Utah. When you see ways to cut costs or streamline processes, develop a plan and write a proposal, Mr. Myler said.

Presenting that to your manager “shows you’re taking initiative, which makes you more valuable,” he said. “You will be seen as a person who is mindful of the company’s bottom line and who has the ability to do something about it. That’s huge.”

Even if you’re not directly involved with revenue generation or budgeting, you might interact with customers or other departments and have cost-saving ideas in those areas.

“Let’s say you have been watching the shipping process and you see there are more steps than needed,” Mr. Myler said. “You propose cutting a few steps to save a specific amount of money and get the product to customers faster.”

Q. *You want to carve out a niche for yourself in the company, one that sets you apart as an expert in a specific area. How do you manage to do that while handling your usual job responsibilities?*

A. To create that niche, focus on what you already know, rather than picking a new area and then trying to learn all about it, said Vaughan Evans, a career strategist in London.

“Let’s say you are very proficient with numbers, quantitative work and with using the Excel program,” Mr. Evans said. “Why not become a master at Excel so that within the organization, you are the go-to person for that program?”

Building on your strengths — and letting your weaknesses go — will enable you to carve out a niche. Keep in mind that your area of expertise needs to be important to the organization, Mr. Evans said.

Q. *Should you ask your manager whether the company would be willing to pay for additional training?*

A. Some career experts say that during a recession, employees should be cautious about asking their companies to cover costs for training, conferences or additional education.

Mr. Myler suggested that if you do ask, be frugal about it. “Asking your company to cover the cost of attendance at a pricey conference probably won’t go over well,” he said. “Instead, ask if they will pay for the conference notes — usually a nominal cost — and do self-study instead.”

Ingrid Stabb, co-author of “The Career Within You,” suggested checking with human resources to see whether tuition reimbursement is among your benefits. That money can be used to pay for a variety of courses that further your expertise in a particular area, she said.

For instance, advanced training in finance, social media marketing or obtaining certification for a specific software program may all qualify for tuition reimbursement. If the company won’t pay, you might want to consider footing the bill yourself for evening or weekend classes or for online courses.

Q. *Although you don’t want to be obnoxious about it, you do want*

management to be aware of all you are doing to enhance your skills and expertise. What's the best way to handle that?

A. Show your strengths in a way that benefits your boss and everyone in your department. Ms. Stabb said: “If your strength is organizing data, for example, and you know there is all this data your boss has but hasn’t organized, create a spreadsheet or table that makes it easier for the department to access the information, and then offer to lead a brown-bag lunch presentation to explain how to read it. People will remember that back in Q1, Jane Smith started this initiative in the department.”

Being helpful toward and protective of others is another way to showcase your knowledge — and integrity — in a nonthreatening way. This applies to both colleagues and managers.

When you have information that could be useful to others, share it, said Sandra Naiman, owner of the executive coaching firm SMN Partners in Denver and author of “High Achiever’s Secret Codebook: The Unwritten Rules for Success at Work.” This could include articles in trade journals, information on the company’s intranet and relevant online sources.

When others go out of their way to help you in a similar manner, always give them credit by sending an e-mail message to their boss to describe the help, she said.

“The bottom line is you want to be known and relied upon by as many people in the organization as possible,” Ms. Naiman said. “The more people who depend upon you for their success, the more valuable you become.”

E-mail: ccouch@nytimes.com.

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