

The One Thing You Need to Get Ahead

By Christine Lee

Think hard work is all you need for career success? Jeffrey Pfeffer, Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Stanford University Graduate School of Business and a [BNET columnist](#), disagrees.

In his latest book, "[Power: Why Some People Have It and Others Don't](#)," Pfeffer argues that the notion of a non-hierarchical workplace is nonsense and that what you need to succeed in the workplace is, above all, power.

BNET: Why write about power?

JP: I always look for some phenomena that is important for understanding organizations, but that people are not writing about. There is, surprisingly, much less research on power than you would think.

And power is good for you! You can monetize it; you can use it to get things done. Michael Marmont and other people have [done research that suggests](#) (PDF) that having power over your work environment actually helps you live longer.

BNET: What can you do to improve your power at work?

JP: The first thing you need to do is to become more aware. What makes a great baseball hitter? Sportscasters often say, "This person is really seeing the ball." Part of this is just awareness, being tuned in to what's going on, and looking behind what you see.

The qualities that seem to be associated with power come under the two categories of will and skill. *Will* is drive, energy, and ambition; *skill* is sensitivity to other people and understanding what their motivations are. You ought to evaluate yourself, or have your colleagues evaluate you, and ask yourself, am I willing to do what it takes to be strong on my weak qualities? Then develop a personal development plan.

BNET: What else?

JP: You can learn some strategies, such as networking. Keith Ferazzi, the famous marketing guru, told my class once—and he's right—you are not responsible for your own success. Your burning ambitions, or even your hard work, won't make you successful. What will make you successful are those people higher up who have power over your career. Your job is to make them *want* to make you successful. And part of that is hard work and good performance, but part of that are the relationships that you build with them. That's why hard work isn't enough.

Another tactic that I think people don't exploit enough is asking for help. People are unwilling to ask. My friend Frank Flynn and a colleague of his, Vanessa Lake, wrote this wonderful article, "[Ask and You're Likely to Get Help](#)." The point of their study is that

people really underestimate the extent to which other people will help them, even for relatively small things. So, people don't ask enough. Ask people to mentor you, ask them for advice, ask for help in a variety of ways. That can help build good relationships with high-status people.

So ask yourself, how are you spending your time? Are you spending your time on high-leverage activities? Are you spending your time on things that will make you stand out? Most of us, when we look back on our day, realize we waste much of our time on low-level activities that don't really move us forward.

BNET: What is the biggest mistake people make when it comes to achieving power?

JP: I see a lot of people who voluntarily give up the opportunity to have a lot of power by saying things like, "I won't play the game. I am not going to schmooze people just because they are useful to me. I do not have to do this."

This is self-handicapping behavior. If you decide there are things you don't want to do, fine. But understand the trade-offs that you make. If you say I am going to go for power, but I am going to do it my way, that's like saying I am going to play football, but I am not going to put on pads and helmets. You won't be successful. You don't have to play the game, but if you choose to play the game, you have to understand the rules.

BNET: What's the best path power at your workplace?

JP: You want to get in on the ground floor of a unit that is going to be powerful, one that touches a lot of different things and has influence over important decisions. You should be dealing with the organization's major challenge at that moment.

In the book, I tell the story of Zia Yusuf, who was the first to basically build the strategic planning function inside of SAP, the German software company. This work brought him into contact with all the executive board members of this large company, giving him enormous visibility. Because he was building this new function, there wasn't a lot of competition. When you go into an already powerful unit, you're likely to get paid more, but that is also where all the talent is.

Think about your career much like you would think about starting a new business. Lots of entrepreneurs have transformed markets and product categories, and you can certainly have that opportunity inside organizations as you add some entrepreneurial skills.

BNET: Why don't people looking for high-level positions seek out those opportunities more?

JP: I think people are risk averse. And just as they are risk averse about starting new companies, they are very risk adverse with respect with their careers. And the irony to me is that people are very risk averse early in their careers, but later on when they become very successful, then they engage in all kinds of risky behavior. Like Dennis Kozlowski of Tyco putting in \$6,000 shower curtains. The time to take risks is early in your career, because then no one is watching you. And the consequences of failure are much lower than they are later in your career.

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