



CALL TO ACTION

Stephanie Hirsh

There are many ways to build a career path

One of the privileges of serving as executive director is the opportunity to hear other professionals' stories and questions. Over the years, I have been asked for advice and support from members, particularly those seeking to make career transitions. The questions take many forms: whether to shift to a new position in a district, what opportunities exist to move to a different kind of organization, how to establish oneself as a consultant.

While my advice varies according to the individual situation, there are some key themes I have learned that may be helpful to you.

Every career step is an opportunity. Each one offers chances for building your resume and positioning yourself as a leader and expert. Planning early for your next career move allows you to consider how to leverage your current position, so even if you are not currently looking to make a change, these considerations may prove useful down the line.

Most important, ensure that you have invested the time necessary to establish credibility and expertise applicable for your next position. For example, if your goal is to support change at the school level, you will have more success if you have spent time as a teacher as well as a principal.

Your experience and examples will help you build a positive relationship with school-based practitioners and provide you with helpful perspectives as

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you design and deliver your services.

If you are not able to invest the years it may take to provide you with experience at the multiple levels at which you hope to serve, consider other ways to establish your credibility. Identify a comparable opportunity that allows you to draw relevant observations as you do your work.

For example, when I hoped to influence policymakers and system leaders, I chose to run for my local school board. Not only did it allow me to serve my local community, it provided countless experiences that increased my credibility with superintendents and elected officials at all levels.

While running for election and serving on a school board may be more than you are willing to undertake, consider other ways you gain perspective and respect from practitioners. Many communities have "principal for a day" opportunities. Shadowing a teacher or student for a week may provide an intense opportunity to learn about the work of an educator.

Interviewing educators and

observing them at work provide opportunities to gain knowledge and develop perspectives. Volunteering in classrooms, joining school or system task forces, and attending open meetings all contribute to your credibility bank.

HOW TO PREPARE

Beyond filling your credibility bank with relevant experiences, there are three concrete actions I consistently recommend educators take to prepare for the next career move.

First, read. Stay current in your field. Read and engage in professional learning in the areas where you intend to support others. Avoid being caught unaware of critical research your potential colleagues or clients are discussing or using. Show that you are ready to bring new information to the table.

Second, publish. Establish your expertise by writing about what you are doing that works in schools. For example, tweet and blog about your classroom or school. Build a following of people who are interested in what you have to share and ultimately trust your advice. In addition, write for magazines and journals. Filling your resume with citations from a variety of publications establishes you as an authority.

Early on, I associated myself with smart people in fields that interested me, and I sought opportunities to serve as their coauthor. Affiliation with more

well-known names can accelerate your recognition as an expert.

Finally, present. Seek opportunities to present on subjects that matter most to you. Participate in as many opportunities as you have time to consider. Being a visible and engaged participant in relevant conversations about your areas of interest will increase the likelihood that people will take a look at what you have to offer and be generous in their response to you.

It will also give you the opportunity to observe leaders, facilitators, and presenters in various situations to inform how you'll present yourself as an up-and-coming leader or expert.

At one point, my resume was more than 20 pages, and the presentation section took up half of it. I never turned down an opportunity to share with my colleagues. I did after-school presentations at my school and later was invited to share at other campuses. I cited all of those experiences until state, regional, and national opportunities came my way and replaced those earlier lines on my resume.

ACCELERATE YOUR REACH

Today, you can accelerate your reach to educators at all levels through the internet. Through these early experiences, you can gather more information about the future career moves that interest you most.

Remember the importance of maintaining a network of colleagues with connections. Ask five people how they got their current job, and I suspect networking played a key role in a majority of them. Start early in building your professional circle of trusted colleagues with whom you



share your goals, seek feedback, and feel comfortable in asking for help. They will be your biggest cheerleaders and, when needed, your most valued critics.

No matter what career stage you're in, remember your responsibility to support others on their professional journeys. I take this advice to heart and look forward to continuing to serve as a mentor during retirement, as other Learning Forward leaders have done.

As educators, our networks flow in every direction throughout our careers. Our emerging leaders need all the support we can provide to ensure they stay invested in education, build their competence, and extend their impact.

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