



Jobs and Careers

Personal Growth

Working Smarter

Managing and Learning

NETWORKING

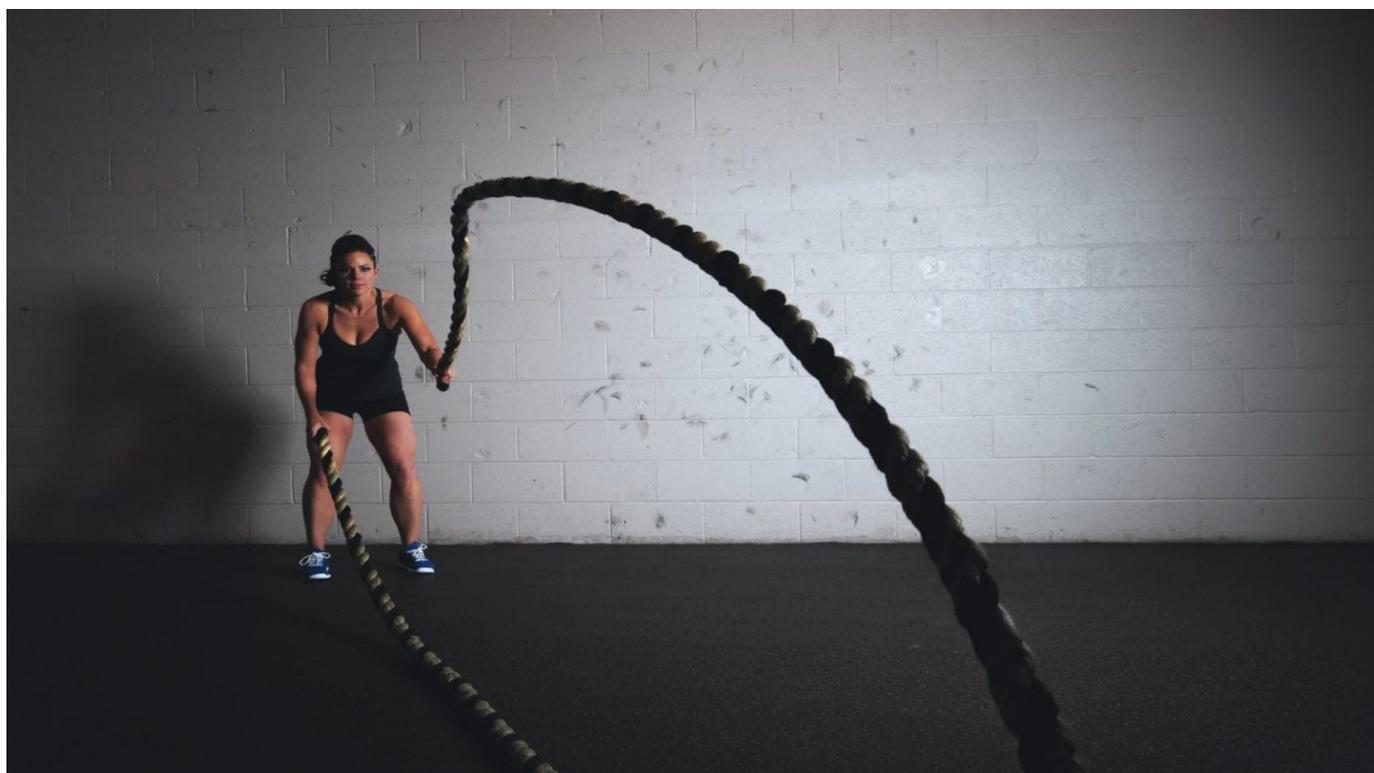
# How to Strengthen Work Relationships and Advance Your Career

♡ 2



Michael C. Wenderoth

8 Nov | 04 mins read 396



Most of us believe that delivering solid work, being helpful, or

presenting persuasively will get us noticed and lead others to support us. But great performance does not always speak for itself.

Organizations are run by people, making it critical that we have strong relationships.

Young professionals, and even rising leaders, struggle with how to master interpersonal skills, the “people part” at work. It’s common to be overlooked by busy executives, ignored when trying to network, and have difficulty building bridges with someone we don’t get along with.

To overcome these [relationship challenges](#), and to advance your work and career, take a different approach: Seek advice.

## How Seeking Advice will Benefit You

Seeking advice feels counterintuitive, as many of us feel that asking for help or feedback makes us look weak, or worse, incompetent. But strategically seeking *advice*—an important shift in how you ask for input—can make you look [more competent](#).

Here are four diverse situations where seeking advice will open doors, get people on your side, and strengthen your relationships:

### 1. When you’re seeking a mentor

Compare “let’s catch up for coffee” or “[I want to pick your brain about...](#)” with the well-crafted approach used by Sam\*, an associate in a consulting firm, to meet a partner: “I’ve been impressed by your poise and delivery, particularly leading our engagement with the telecom client. Others follow and respect you. I would really value your

advice on how I can develop that skill at this key inflection point in my career.”

The partner felt honored and not only agreed to meet and provide Sam advice, but also ended up coaching her. By seeking advice, Sam tapped into the power of **liking**: we help those who we like, and we like those who are **similar to us** or make us feel good about **ourselves**. We also attribute more **credibility** to those that flatter us.

Asking for advice—compared to asking for feedback—got the partner to empathize and take Sam’s perspective and also made the partner more likely to become an advocate for Sam.

## 2. When you’re asking for a promotion

Telling your boss you want a promotion feels self-serving. The typical approach is to ask for feedback or elaborate why you deserve being promoted. It’s important to be assertive, and artfully asking for **feedback** is useful, but a smarter approach is to ask your boss for his or her advice on *how* to get promoted.

Daniel, aiming for a leadership role, told his boss: “I’m keen to keep growing and get promoted to lead the group. I’d value your advice on the most compelling ways to do that.”

By seeking advice, Daniel made his boss aware of his aspiration. More importantly, he received valuable information on what his boss saw as most important. And having shared recommendations on how to rise, his boss became less likely to contradict himself when Daniel followed his advice, as we tend to **stay consistent** with our own

recommendations.



*Young professionals, and even rising leaders, struggle with how to master interpersonal skills, the “people part” at work.*

---

### 3. When you're seeking support for your initiative

Most of us speculate how others will react to a proposal, but it's much better to know where they stand, in advance.

Jack, in product development, sought out the marketing VP a week before a key meeting: “Steve, we've got a technical winner that I know will grow market share. Can I get your advice on the presentation, to make sure the commercial opportunity stands out?”

Seeking advice from key stakeholders **builds support** and avoids surprises. Jack learned the influential VP's reaction in private in advance, and adjusted his approach based on the advice. The VP felt honored that Jack came to him—and because he had **a hand in shaping** the proposal, he lent Jack support in the meeting.

### 4. When you want to convert an adversary into an ally

The last thing you want is advice from someone you dislike! But building a bridge is often the first step to fixing a contentious relationship. Find a connection, even a small one, by identifying something the other person does well, and then seek their advice on that point.

Take Alex, a marketing manager, whose boss paired him with the IT director to implement a software solution. Having butted heads with the director in the past, Alex stepped back and invited him to lunch:

“Will, I know we haven’t seen eye to eye, but we have a common goal of a successful launch. You are incredibly skilled at managing finance. As we pitch this, what’s your advice on how we get the budget through?”

Alex needed to establish trust. Seeking Will’s advice brought the two together around a higher cause, framing the goal as “us versus them.” They didn’t become best friends, but Will took the olive branch and even reciprocated. Because let’s face it: Sometimes you have no choice and must make difficult relationships work. In fact, Alex’s boss wanted to test how the two future leaders worked together.

## Top 3 Mistakes to Avoid When Seeking Advice

### 1. Overdoing it

While we worry others will see our compliments as contrived, it’s hard to overdo flattery. The best approach is to be sincere: Focus on what the other person uniquely excels at and provide context on why you are asking *them*—and not just anyone—for their advice.

### 2. Accepting everything you’re told

Sometimes the advice you receive may not be useful. Be open to a fresh point of view, but don’t follow it blindly. People come with **their own baggage**: they may speak from their personal experience, they

may have their own self-interest in mind, or they may not have full background on your situation.

### 3. Failing to plan for backlash

If you don't follow the advice you are given, some people may get offended, [harming your relationship](#) or leading to retaliation. Tread carefully if the person is an expert, has a huge ego, or would get upset knowing you sought advice from others.

Before approaching, look into the person's background. Think about how likely you are to accept the advice, or how that person will react if you don't follow the recommendations. If you are worried, make it clear you are seeking the advice of others, or ask for more general guidance, which gives you leeway in how you follow it. Consider giving advance notice if you will do something different than you were advised, or how you will later explain your decision to them.

If you manage these areas, seeking advice will open up a productive channel to improve and deepen your relationships. It's a highly versatile strategy for getting the "people part" at work right, and can make all the difference.

*\*All names and identifying details have been changed*



Have questions or feedback for us? Write to us at [hbrascend@hbr.org](mailto:hbrascend@hbr.org)

2/3

FREE CONTENT  
PIECES LEFT

Learn and grow with HBR Ascend  
*Get greater access to our thoughtfully  
curated content.*

SIGN UP



## Michael C. Wenderoth

Michael C. Wenderoth is an Executive Coach and professor at IE Business School in Madrid, Spain. His focus is Leadership and Managing Up.



### Similar Content

NETWORKING

**3 Traits of a Strong Professional Relationship**

NETWORKING

**The Best Way to Respond to the Question, "What Do You Do?"**

26 Aug | 04 mins read

 5,094 

9 Oct | 04 mins read

 1,793 



## Trending

MOTIVATING YOURSELF

### Feeling Undervalued at Work? Here's What You Can Do

Use specific examples to jog your boss's memory of your good work.

7 Nov | 01 min read

 4,908 