

Climbing the corporate ladder

The real ingredients and the common mistakes

There are at least two kinds of Corporate Game involving climbing ladders that get played: most people confuse the two.

The first is The Ladder Game. In this, it's all about going up. To do this all you have to do is to find the right squares that propel you up the ladder most rapidly. That is not as easy as it sounds because you cannot see the board - only the next step. Unfortunately, some never do the right thing - they make the wrong choices (believing that luck plays a part) and have to plod through their career a few steps at a time. Some even think the 'Lad' bit in the name of the game is relevant. Some stay put through lack of drive and talent.

The second game is called The Snakes and Ladders Game. In this game you can do the equivalent of going down as well as up. What is more, there are a lot more snake heads nearer the top, and a lot further to fall.

All players are playing the second game, but most act as if they are in the first. They forget the traps. This article is to remind you of them.

Let's start with you rookies to the job recruitment game - the new folks on the block. You assume that ambition is good, and that climbing the corporate ladder is the obvious career goal. Both of these are reasonable assumptions, but you must not forget that your raw talent needs honing with experience, and that this experience needs nurturing in the right companies with good market credentials, good training policies and plenty of ladders for the right players. Raw energy will help, but do not forget that it is not a game for one (some will have started the game long before you), and that you have to give other players a turn sometimes too.

Here are some of the other rules in the corporate ladders and the snakes game. Consider them the career equivalent of the birds and the bees.

The ladders - the things that propel you upwards with some speed - are not always what you think. They appear to include:

- Impression management and self-promotion.
- Networking with the key people.
- Determination to succeed/single-mindedness and whatever it takes.
- Ruthlessness to have an impact.
- Taking more risks than others.
- Looking very active and fast-moving.
- Management of 'others' in pursuit of your cause (politics and diplomacy).
- Making sure the successes are logged to you and the failures to others.
- Getting 'close to the sun' (your bosses) or visibility.

The snakes always seem to appear from nowhere, but are important too. They are things that might knock you back in the promotion stakes. The snakes - for many aspiring corporate climbers - appear to include:

- Honesty and saying it like it is, or should be (It gets you into trouble).
- Working smart and determining your own list of priorities for success in the job, instead of just pleasing people and doing what they say. (People see lack of commitment).
- Taking account of the ethical and moral dimension in business decisions. (It costs deals).
- Taking a minority position if you believe it is right, or a detached view. (Others see you as outside the team).
- Taking responsibility for the mistakes you or your team makes. (It gets you noticed for the wrong reasons).
- Doing a good job quietly and without looking for the boss's eye. (Your achievements go unnoticed).
- Bringing attention to the problems others have not seen in a decision. (People think you jealous and want to hijack the situation).

- Having a balanced life outside work. (You should do what the others do).
- Saying 'no' when you have a different priority list. (It isolates you).
- Commitment to your colleagues and team. (You need to move with the stars).

One thing might surprise you, but will not on reflection: the things that appear as the ladders are actually the snakes.

In the longer term, playing the corporate ladder game according to the rules in the first list will fail in a good company with good management. And in the end it is those companies that you will want to be in. For example, many falsely believe that 'sucking up' to the boss gets you places, but that is only true in the worse managed organisations. You should not want to work in these kinds of places. So make a careful selection yourself.

There are also many negative short, and long term, consequences of playing by the rules of this game: poorly directed effort, spending time on activities that do not develop your talents and skills but make you look good for a short time, having to second-guess what is in the mind of others, perhaps portraying an impression that is not really you, backstabbing other competitors (your friends even), personal isolation, making enemies, the unexpected urgencies that break cherished family time, the personal loss felt by partner/spouse of being always 'second'. The list could be much longer.

If you really want to climb the corporate ladder, you need to play by different rules. Yes, you guessed it, those things that look like the snakes are really the ladders. The 'snakes' of the second list turn into ladders when you really take responsibility for your performance instead of playing others' games. If you want money, status and the feeling of achievement, you need to take account of them. Real achievement needs to replace pretence and appearance. Real integrity needs to replace managed impressions. Yes, of course, some people get up the snakes, but they are always having to cling on hard.