

MANAGEMENT & CAREERS

Among Today's Most Prized Leadership Qualities: Playing Nicely

Rivals would be wise to avoid backstabbing when vying for the same plum job, recruiters say

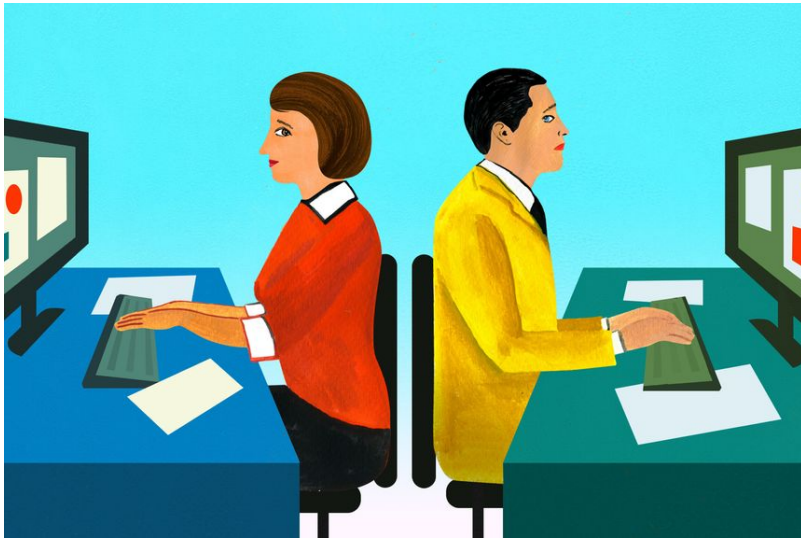


PHOTO: ELLEN WEINSTEIN

By Joann S. Lublin

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Julie Sweet won a recent internal race to take command of consulting giant Accenture PLC for many reasons. Among the most unique: She excelled at praising colleagues she competed against for the top job, an individual familiar with Accenture said.

Getting along well with your peers counts for a lot when you vie for the same plum promotion. Your management career may benefit even if you lose the race. Yet it can be hard to cooperate and compete at the same time.

More corporate boards are scrutinizing whether internal CEO prospects play nicely with each other, directors and executive coaches say. CEO succession contests at big businesses, such as Morgan Stanley, JPMorgan Chase & Co. and Walt Disney Co., can be hotly contested and take years.

Moving up has long represented the most popular path to the corner office. About 73% of the heads of S&P 500 companies who were selected last year came from within, compared with 69% in 2017, according to Spencer Stuart, an executive-recruitment firm. BMW AG , Glassdoor Inc., Nucor Corp. , Schlumberger Ltd. and Vertex Pharmaceuticals Inc. all tapped an insider this summer as their next chief executive.

Employers now prefer to elevate highly collaborative executives. “Today, inclusion and collaboration are the declared values of a lot of large organizations because those qualities demonstrate effective leadership,” said Janice Waterman, founder and CEO of Waterman Hurst. The provider of leadership career services often counsels executives about how to work with competitors for higher-level spots.



Julie Sweet won an internal race to take the helm at consulting giant Accenture. PHOTO: LUCY NICHOLSON/REUTERS

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American unit, which accounts for almost half of Accenture's revenue. During the race to be CEO, though some internal criticism surfaced of her unit and her performance, she stayed positive, the person with knowledge said.

An Accenture spokeswoman declined to comment. Ms. Sweet declined to be interviewed about her advancement, which took effect this month.

Senior managers frequently discover that a promotion competitor subtly undermines them, such as by stealing credit for their accomplishments. Leadership specialists suggest asking an influential internal mentor to confirm this mistreatment and alert decision makers.

Your mentor also “can be a sounding board for managing your emotions,” said Noah Eisenkraft, a visiting scholar at Duke University's Fuqua School of Business. “You have the stress of competing for the management promotion,” said Mr. Eisenkraft, who has studied workplace rivalry.

You might reduce that stress by reaching out to associates and agreeing to not denigrate each other when you pursue the same promotion. The strategy succeeded for several executives advised by Paul Winum, co-head of board and CEO services for RHR International LLP, a leadership-development firm.

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“Addressing the elephant in the room can help diffuse some of the tension that naturally occurs in these competitive situations,” Dr. Winum said.

Rachel Moniz used a different approach to compete cooperatively with a colleague of HEI Hotels & Resorts, which runs 83 U.S. hotels, as they each were considered to become its next executive vice president of operations.

Ms. Moniz said she sought to avoid any impression that she was sabotaging her rival during their succession contest. For example, she worked on projects for him and his group rather than assign those duties to her staffers.

“By not delegating, I made sure his region was properly attended to,” she said.

Ms. Moniz won the promotion, and began her new role in January 2019. She urges ambitious executives to focus on forging strong bonds with possible internal competitors “even prior to raising your hand for a promotion.”

That’s exactly what Charles Urbain and Kasper Jakobsen did before they competed to lead Mead Johnson Nutrition Co., a baby-food maker whose products include Enfamil infant formula. The pair had worked well together since 1998, when Mr. Jakobsen joined as a marketing middle manager and Mr. Urbain already was a seasoned Mead executive.

“I helped him a lot to find his feet [there],” Mr. Urbain said.

“Mutual respect followed and allowed us to develop a close friendship,” Mr. Jakobsen said. During the subsequent horse race, both promised to work for the victor or keep the loser. Mr. Jakobsen ascended to chief executive in 2013.

Mr. Urbain said he felt disappointed but didn’t quit because he loved his longtime employer and Mr. Jakobsen needed him.

“In my experience, runners-up for CEO rarely stay beyond an elegant transition period,” said James Citrin, head of the North American CEO practice at Spencer Stuart. “They usually leave to take the top job elsewhere or because they didn’t quite mesh with the new CEO.”

Four years ago, Mr. Jakobsen chose Mr. Urbain to be his chief operating officer. The executives left Mead following its 2017 acquisition by Reckitt Benckiser Group PLC.

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