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## The First Six Months: Launching a PSF Career

### Liam Quinlan and John Sheehan

Sitting on the patio at Shay's Pub on a warm and sunny Tuesday afternoon in early May 2014, Liam Quinlan clinked his wineglass to John Sheehan's beer mug in celebration of the completion of their final Harvard Business School exam. "It's hard to believe," Sheehan toasted, "that in less than a month we'll both be carrying our daughters across the stage to shake Dean Nohria's hand and we'll be done here at HBS."

Quinlan and Sheehan had spent considerable time together at HBS as next-door-neighbors in Soldiers Field Park, members of the same first-year study group, fathers of three-year-old best friends, and husbands of co-presidents of the HBS Partners Club. "But John and I couldn't be more different," Quinlan averred. "Yeah, we hate each other," chuckled Sheehan, "because Liam refuses to recognize that he went to the wrong school, supports the wrong soccer team, thinks the east coast is the place to be and prefers wine! At least HBS is making him a little smarter because he's decided to follow me to Barker [Consulting]."

The two classmates enjoyed pointing out, even exaggerating, their differences. Quinlan had attended the U.S. Naval Academy graduating in 2007; Sheehan graduated from the U.S. Military Academy at West Point in 2008 and was stationed in Germany for four years before returning stateside. Sheehan, a die-hard fan of Germany's national soccer team, "took tremendous pleasure" from forcing Quinlan, a soccer fanatic himself and a fan of Brazil's team, into watching Germany win the 2014 World Cup. Yet both were excited to begin careers in the newly created startup practice at Barker Consulting, a top strategy firm—Quinlan remaining in Boston and Sheehan travelling to Barker's San Francisco office.

"I can't wait until our six month reviews" Quinlan remarked, "as those free plane tickets to the Bay Area will be nice in the depth of winter." Sheehan and Quinlan had made a bet, unbeknownst to their wives, that the one with the lower performance rating after six months would send plane tickets to the other to come and visit. "Although I certainly want Liam to succeed," Sheehan interjected, "he's *definitely* got the wrong strategy. In six months, I'll be much more interested in his admitting that I was right than actually getting the plane tickets, although Judy and Jennifer [Sheehan's wife and daughter] will enjoy coming back East to see Kate and Tiffany [Quinlan's wife and daughter]."

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The two soon-to-be consultants had first realized their different strategies while reading the other's final paper for the *Managing Human Capital* (MHC) course. Students were required to include in their papers their strategies for ensuring a quick start in their new jobs. "While we shared the same goal—to quickly earn 'star' status at Barker—our strategies and the tradeoffs we were planning to make were *vastly* different," recalled Quinlan. "We couldn't both be right and yet we were both confident of our respective approaches. I suggested that we boil down our approach into the key differences, put the differences on paper, each hold ourselves accountable for committing to our strategy for the entire six months, and make the wager to add some extra fun and significance to the debate. Time will tell which one of us is right." (See **Figure 1** for a chart of Quinlan's and Sheehan's differences.)

**Figure 1** Differences in Quinlan's and Sheehan's Strategies for Early Success at Barker Consulting

Category	Liam Quinlan	John Sheehan
<b>Breadth vs. Depth of Knowledge</b>	I want to be viewed as having a "solid handle" on a wide array of startup client issues.	I seek to knock my analysis "out-of-the-park" and become a recognized knowledge expert in one or two client problem areas.
<b>Self-promotion</b>	Respecting cultural norms, I'm going to self-promote as much as possible. Most people will only know how well I'm doing if I tell them in unobtrusive ways.	I plan to let my work and contribution pretty much speak for itself. I will trust Barker's review system to ensure that people know about my good work.
<b>Networking</b>	Going directly to partners at the outset will make me seem like a "suck-up". Instead, I will network extensively with peers and well-regarded managers, get a sense from them for how the organization really works, and let my peers and managers talk me up to the partners.	I will network intensively with partners in my areas of interest. If I can demonstrate how quickly I've picked up depth of knowledge, they'll get a really good feel for me and support me in front of others.
<b>Extra Work</b>	I'll become heavily involved in HBS recruiting and office-based socials. I want to meet many people and let people know I'm someone who cares about the firm and is great with people. They'll think I'll be great with clients.	If I have "extra" time, I'll do something extra to build knowledge and go-beyond-the-call in my current engagement(s). I want the partners I work with to see that I'm focused and that I deliver the <b>best</b> work. I first want to become known for intellectual rigor and for results that help clients. I'll do the firm-based "soft stuff" later in my career, when I am measured for it.
<b>HBS Ties</b>	I'm going to try to build relationships with colleagues from other schools. I don't want people to classify me as "an HBS guy." People from other schools have negative connotations of HBS grads.	I'm planning to network and spend time with people who share the HBS background. HBS alumni make up 20% of the firm and it will be easier to get to know them and share experiences than with non-HBS types. Most people from other schools flock around their own—it's only natural for people to bunch with others from their alma maters.

Category	Liam Quinlan	John Sheehan
<b>First Assignment</b>	Although I'll do my best to identify a project I like and get on it, I don't want to get a reputation for being "hard to please" and "tough to deal with," particularly as an HBS grad.	I'm going to make sure my first assignment is with a great partner and on a high exposure project. I want to get on the right playing field initially and work with the stars. This may require patience and a few diplomatic "no's." People will forget about the push-back if I do great work.
<b>Face Time</b>	If the Barker people know I'm committed to doing great work and having strong values in my personal life, they'll respect my choice of how I structure my time.	I want people to know I'm totally committed to doing well at Barker. For the first six months anyway, I'll normally plan to be the first at work and the last to leave.
<b>Mentors</b>	In about six months, I hope to have four or five mentors at Barker: one or two peer mentors, two or three manager mentors, and one or two partner sponsors. Over time, I will ask more partners to join my "personal board of directors."	I want to get one <i>great</i> partner mentor. I want to work with <i>the</i> star in the organization, connect with that person, and develop close personal and professional bonds with that person. If I have more than one mentor, great, but one great mentor-sponsor is all one really needs.

## Steve DiGiovanni

Feeling his insides "begin to boil" and trying to deal with the "shocking news," Steve DiGiovanni sat in Barker Consulting's New York office, across a desk from his partner-mentor Ed Egan. Egan had just handed DiGiovanni his official written performance evaluation which indicated that DiGiovanni had been classified a *Category III* performer (out of five classes; a Category III was equivalent to being rated in the middle of his class). DiGiovanni had fully expected that he would be rated a *Category I* "star." This was his first review since he graduated from Harvard Business School six months earlier.

DiGiovanni listened superficially as Egan rattled through some positive comments contained in the review. His emotions welled up when Egan got to the "Points for Discussion" section which contained the following bullets:

- "Steve's work has been good and has met expectations but not exceeded it."
- "Steve has contributed solidly but not stood out in his client or firm-building projects."
- "Steve once misstated facts in a key client presentation at Walsh Manufacturing. At the end of the project, Walsh chose not to hire Barker Consulting for a follow-on project. Steve's mistake was only one of the many factors leading to Walsh's decision, but it did contribute to Walsh's perception that the Barker team was not fully prepared."

- “Steve needs to work on being more polished in front of clients.”
- “Steve’s peer-mentor reported that she spent much less time with Steve than her other three mentees.”

Picking his eyes up from the paper, Egan focused on DiGiovanni, remarking:

I really like you Steve and want you to succeed. I’ve seen it happen sometimes that our forced curve can be really harsh to some people. In your class, you have some people that the firm considers not just stars but *superstars*. They have many advocates and sponsors already in the firm.

Please realize that there are many partners in this firm that were not rated Category I or II in their first review. I really believe you have the potential to become partner here if you work hard at it. I’m sorry you’re so obviously disappointed.

DiGiovanni sat silently, hoping Egan would continue talking, since he wasn’t ready to respond yet. Thoughts were quickly racing inside his head: “What’s really going on here? Am I getting screwed? Have I failed? Should I ask for time to sort this out? Should I respond immediately and say this is B.S.? Is Egan the person I want to talk this out with? Should I start calling headhunters this afternoon?”