

# EXPECT TO WIN



## Book Expect to Win

### Proven Strategies for Success from a Wall Street Vet

Carla A. Harris  
Hudson Street Press, 2009

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### Recommendation

The author of this inspirational career guide is a black female managing director at a top Wall Street investment bank. And if that weren't enough, she's also a recording artist and gospel singer in her spare time. Carla A. Harris emphasizes developing your "authentic self" in the workplace, setting your career plan and taking responsibility for your professional advancement. She also tells a great personal story in this realistic, readily accessible book, summarizing her insights as "Carla's Pearls" at the end of each chapter. While her advice may ring familiar tones with most corporate veterans, Harris says her book will boost "women, women of color, and anyone (men, too) who desires to maximize their potential and claim their power in a professional environment." *BooksInShort* wholeheartedly concurs and considers this worthwhile material, particularly for those who seek guidance and encouragement at the start of their careers.

### Take-Aways

- Being "your authentic self" at work lets you leverage the advantage and power you bring to your organization.
- Setting a precise but flexible career plan makes you "the architect" of your own future.
- In today's competitive environment, assume you have only 90 days to master your new job and learn the informal rules of engagement.
- Working hard isn't enough; others' perceptions of you will determine your advancement.
- Advisers, mentors and sponsors each play distinct but critical roles in your career.
- Your "voice" at work reflects your contribution, relevance and expectations; use it wisely to make the right impression.
- Take "calculated" and "forward" risks in your career; failure can teach you a great deal.
- Foster "upward, lateral, downward and external relationships" with superiors, colleagues and assistants, subordinates, and outside contacts.
- Capture the joy outside your workplace. Make time for hobbies, volunteerism and family.
- That which you offer authentically of yourself returns to you in career and life success.

### Summary

#### The Value of Authenticity

When you're hired for a job, it confirms that you have a unique set of skills, abilities and personality traits that your employer wants over those of other candidates. This is your competitive advantage in the workplace. The skills and talents you bring also give you power within the organization. When you maximize the characteristics and skills that helped you secure your job in the first place, you free yourself to learn, create and take risks. Being "your authentic self" at work makes you more valuable to your employer.

"Hard work and smarts are not enough to succeed."

When you're authentic, you exude self-confidence; you're comfortable in your own skin, and that's evident to clients, bosses and colleagues. But when you're not sure of your goals, your talents or even whether you're in the right industry, you inhibit your own flexibility and creativity, and that erodes your self-assurance. People who lose self-confidence can appear apprehensive, passive or false. That inauthenticity will undermine your bosses' perceptions of you, hurt your client relationships and raise questions among colleagues about your capabilities.

“For the success equation to be complete, hard work, skills and intelligence need a few more additives, such as strategy, relationships, politics, tenacity and faith.”

If you’ve fallen into this trap, work on knowing yourself. Recognize your strengths and your weaknesses. Emphasize the qualities that make you interesting and valuable. Understand who you are, why you chose your job and your company, and what your goals are; otherwise, you’ll find yourself “struggling up the ladder... [that’s] leaning against the wrong building.” Distill this information into an “elevator speech,” a short description of your professional essence.

“Your power lies in putting your best self forward each day.”

Build your personal integrity, so that customers and co-workers will know where you stand on real workplace issues. Authenticity extends to including your personal values, such as spirituality, in your work. Don’t be intrusive or overbearing, but don’t hide your core beliefs, either. Let others know about your outside interests and hobbies, all of which can add another dimension to your career. For instance, when author Carla A. Harris is not working as an investment banker, she is a gospel singer and recording artist. When asked to perform at a company function, she first turned down the request, not wanting to blend her personal life with her job. But she overcame her hesitation; at the end of her song, she met a senior executive responsible for promotions. That chance meeting led to an important contact for Harris’s career.

## **A Personal Journey: Setting Your Agenda**

Building your career goals means being “the architect” of your future. Make your own agenda, deciding what is important and valuable in your career, and impose a time frame. This agenda will guide your path, including pointing out areas where you need more education or improvement. Career goals should be overarching (“I would like to be in broadcast journalism”) as well as tactical (“I want...to learn about product X for two years and then move to a sales role”). But keep your career plans flexible, and recognize that different paths may lead to your objectives. Harris once accepted a job assignment that, on its surface, kept her from her client-focused agenda but, in practice, gave her crucial exposure to new executives and responsibilities that propelled her career forward.

“Part of being authentic is choosing a job and an environment that you are comfortable working in, one where you know that you can comply with both the written and unwritten rules.”

A self-directed agenda also helps you keep perspective. Don’t compare your progress with your peers’; they may have different priorities. Someone else’s promotion should trigger an objective review of your goals, not a knee-jerk reaction that will cause you to alter your long-term agenda or embitter you. Timetables for promotions in some firms are based on industry norms, so use that data as your guide. Stay objective and true to your plan – new opportunities will arise in time.

“If you are resenting your environment or your job, then your authentic self will get lost in that company, as will your competitive advantage.”

Everyone makes mistakes, so don’t turn yours into insurmountable obstacles to your success. When you make an error, acknowledge it, learn from it and move on. You control your professional agenda, so mistakes shouldn’t derail your progress or your timetable.

Professional advancement also depends on knowing the “corporate ecosystem” and the people inside your organization who can support your development. “Workhorses” are those who succeed in companies by knowing their jobs and toiling away at them. “Political maniacs” may not be the best at their jobs, but they know how to work the system and build relationships to move their careers forward. Recognize which camp you tend to fall into, and align yourself with like-minded superiors. Promotions are more likely to happen when you work for someone who values your abilities and can reward them.

## **Three Months to Impress**

In today’s business environment, new employees should assume they have only 90 days to master their basic job and the unspoken conventions of the firm. When you’re first hired, your credentials give your employer an idea of your capabilities, but the “subjective idea of fit” is what will determine your long-range success. Job compatibility includes your awareness of the “formal and informal rules of the game,” your company knowledge, and your ability to relate to others.

“On most days you should be able to make the case that you are adding value to your firm, taking steps toward realizing your personal goals, and that you are enjoying doing it.”

Unwritten rules abound, from learning what gatherings you should attend and how to phrase questions during important meetings to knowing who the main “go-to” decision maker is and how people dress for work. New hires should become part of their work group on a social level by going out to lunch, coffee or after-work drinks. If you are not formally invited, join the group anyway, and make an attempt to participate at any possible opportunity.

“Part of the advantage of developing your own professional agenda is that you take responsibility for what is happening to you in your career.”

In your first three months, get to know the important executives in the company, and work to build those relationships. Use a calendar as a 90-day countdown for tracking your progress. Don’t expect anyone else to train you; take the initiative to get the education you need. For example, to hone her presentation skills – which were crucial to her hopes for a promotion to vice president – Harris sought out public speaking opportunities in her volunteer work.

“People who repeatedly find career success learn to broaden their perspective and understand that there are always several roads to getting where you want to go.”

Your 90-day goal is to be able to perform your job well while showing that you are a quick, adaptable learner. Your managers and co-workers develop their impressions of you in this period. By focusing attention on the quality of your output now, you take control of people’s assessments. The results will determine your long-term career success.

## **“Perception Is the Co-Pilot to Reality”**

Don't think that just hard work will position you for success. How your superiors and colleagues perceive you determines how you are treated. Their perceptions – accurate or not – will color what assignments you receive and, eventually, your pay and promotions. Your goal is to conduct a campaign to have people respect your judgment and ideas, and to follow your suggestions. Come up with three adjectives that describe your “personal brand” and that ally with qualities your firm values. Then speak and behave according to those three words.

“The question to ask is: ‘What do people think of when they say or hear my name?’”

To improve how others see you, first learn what they think by asking four to six people – both admirers and “nonfans” – for feedback about your strengths and weaknesses. Those who are critical of you may be biased because they are your internal competitors, but soliciting their impressions is an opportunity to bridge divisions and build coalitions.

“You should look at relationships as the important connector to climbing up the career ladder.”

Perceptions are important in large, complex organizations because at different levels, people expect you to act in certain ways. If you are a young aspiring employee, you need to show enthusiasm and commitment; mid-level managers should project leadership qualities; senior-level people should come across as authoritative and forward-thinking.

## **Advisers, Mentors and Sponsors**

Most people don't understand the different roles of sponsors, mentors and advisers, and the value each can bring to a career. An adviser can help you with specific, right-now concerns about your job; this trusted resource can be someone in your company or someone you know, like a former professor or friend. Your relationship with your mentor is broader and requires a high level of confidence. You should feel comfortable sharing confidential details about your career goals with a mentor. Your mentor doesn't necessarily have to work at your company, but he or she should know enough about your industry and your job to be able to offer effective counsel. You can have more than one mentor, but they all should be trusted confidants.

“One of the most important keys to maximizing your professional success is exercising your voice.”

Sponsors deserve your utmost focus, because they can directly affect your career advancement. Sponsors should have authority within your firm, and if they accept your invitation to sponsor you, they will “carry your paper into the room” or advocate for you in meetings where you are not present. Requesting sponsorship from a superior can be unnerving, but remember that you'll benefit whether or not your sponsor agrees to work with you: If he or she declines your approach, then you have the opportunity to “gain valuable insight” into your real career potential.

“Success in a corporate environment involves stellar performance, integration into the politics and risk taking.”

In complex, competitive organizations, promotions depend on more factors than just being the “best qualified.” You – through your sponsor – should persuade decision makers that you add value to the firm. If you have the qualifications for advancement but no sponsor, don't be surprised if you aren't promoted. Work to identify a future sponsor.

“Giving back is a constant reminder that there is another world outside of our jobs where our gifts, talents and abilities can be useful to ourselves and others.”

Over time, create your own “board of directors” comprised of advisers, mentors and sponsors with different backgrounds, ethnicities and levels of seniority. And remember to pay back your board with your help and support.

## **Use Your “Voice”**

Everyone in an organization has a voice that demonstrates his or her contribution and relevance to the company. Using your voice also helps define your career expectations. Since your voice is a personal presentation of how you think and of the impression you want to create, make sure it reflects your intellect and orientation. For example, if you are quantitatively inclined, make numeric references in your questions and presentations. If you work in a creative capacity, find innovative ways of addressing a response.

Your voice creates an impression, so think before you talk, but do speak up in meetings; otherwise, you run the risk of others seeing you as incapable or uninterested. Make sure your comments are relevant, factual and timely. Project authority, and if someone asks you a question you don't know the answer to, don't admit it; remember the “Frequently Wrong, but Never in Doubt” principle – it's better to respond confidently now and stand corrected later.

Using your voice effectively helps make your case for promotion. If you do not speak up, or if you have not developed the ability to present yourself, your career will suffer. Start setting your expectations during your first month on the job. Talk to your boss every two months about meeting your goals. This is especially important if you are awaiting a promotion that is contingent on attaining certain benchmarks. If you have achieved these milestones, tell your boss.

## **Risk and Balance**

Take risks in order to advance your career, but do your homework first so that your leaps are “forward” and “calculated.” Don't let fear keep you from taking risks: “Failure gives us the gift of experience.” Cultivate your business network: Foster “upward, lateral, downward and external relationships” to include superiors, colleagues and assistants, subordinates, and outside contacts.

While you want to achieve business and career success, you also need to capture the joy that is outside your workplace. Make time for hobbies, volunteerism and family: “When your job is all you have, your life becomes a function of someone else's day.” When you give back to others, you generate spiritual benefits and create a positive feedback loop – that which you offer authentically of yourself returns to you in career and life success.

# About the Author

*Fortune* magazine named Morgan Stanley managing director **Carla A. Harris** to its “Most Influential List” in 2005. *Black Enterprise* magazine hailed Harris as one of the “75 Most Powerful Blacks on Wall Street” in 2006.

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