

Perspectives on Leadership

The Best Know How

Saj-nicole A. Joni 06.08.07, 4:50 PM ET

How does someone move from administrative assistant to vice president of programming at ABC, or from running a soap opera magazine to head of Fox Studios? The answer: Find a massive dose of talent and guts and mix it with Patricia Fili-Krushel, executive vice president at Time Warner.

"Talent and motivation are much more important than status or background," says Fili-Krushel. "I look for people who consistently over-deliver, outperform expectations and learn from failure. I pay a lot of attention to how someone thinks--how free they are, how expansive, if they know their own mind and are willing to disagree."



Don Randel, Mellon Foundation president, puts it this way: "Imagination and the ability to inspire trust are hugely important--much more so than the steady ability to move up the ladder."

When Fili-Krushel was president of ABC Daytime, Sue Johnson was her administrative assistant. While Johnson was content in that position and aspired to no greater responsibility, it was clear to Fili-Krushel that this woman was a talented writer with leadership capacity far beyond her role. When Fili-Krushel became president of ABC Networks, she convinced Johnson to move into a managerial position.

Challenged by greater responsibilities that required sharp intellect and leadership skills, she embraced her future and never looked back. Today, Sue Johnson is ABC's vice president of programming.

When Fili-Krushel met Angela Shapiro, she knew she had met a winner. Shapiro was publisher of Soap Opera Digest and a successful serial entrepreneur. Though Shapiro lacked a marketing degree and knew nothing about TV, Fili-Krushel recognized in her a marketing superstar who knew the world of daytime programming.

Although Shapiro did not have relevant degrees or television experience, Fili-Krushel hired her as head of marketing for ABC Daytime, standing by her as she learned the ropes of TV and large organizations.

Fili-Krushel later promoted Shapiro to president of ABC Daytime. She went on to lead ABC Family, Fox Studios and, currently, the Learning Channel.

Big breaks--meeting the right person, being in the right place at the right time--are unexpected and high-trajectory career moves. They rarely appear in exactly the form that one might prefer, and it often requires a healthy dose of courage to forge ahead into uncharted waters.

Carter McClelland, former president of Bank America Securities, spotted Kevin Parker at Morgan Stanley ([nyse:MS - news - people](#)), where Parker was emerging as a successful derivatives trader in Asian markets. At the time, McClelland was Morgan Stanley's head of finance, administration and operations, and he saw in Parker a high-energy, raw talent capable of much more--if he was willing to broaden and develop his range.

McClelland made the unconventional move of suggesting Parker take the role of global chief information officer, though he had no prior management experience in information technology. Parker almost turned him down, but reconsidered and accepted. The experience allowed him to see the inner workings of the enterprise; he quickly expanded his portfolio of management skills.

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When McClelland departed to head investment banking at DeutscheBank (nyse: [DB - news - people](#)), Parker eventually followed, becoming head of equities. Today, Parker heads all of the bank's asset management business. He likely would not be there without McClelland offering him his big break, an opportunity that might have looked like a detour to a lesser talent.

Sharon Allen, chairman of Deloitte & Touche USA, knows from experience that you often don't discover what you are capable of until someone gives you the opportunity. "It all started in Boise, Idaho. I worked with someone who literally stepped aside and let me take his role because he knew I was ready for it. It was a big deal, a very big break."

In 1999, Allen was asked to take on a big job in Southern California. "The job was a stretch for me at the time, and I later understood it was a play for my potential. Given this chance, I outdid what I believed possible at the time."

Allen went on to put finding, mentoring and promoting talent at the core of her leadership. Today, her vision and experience play a key role as the company invests in rethinking its entire approach to talent--creating a flexible environment that has opened big-break possibilities to individuals who were previously passed over as unable to accommodate the work, travel and scheduling rigors normally associated with such positions.

Yet creating an opportunity for someone can also mean passing over others--a delicate balance that needs to be handled carefully.

In 2005, while serving as president of the University of Chicago, Don Randel went outside the university to tap Ron Schiller to become vice president of development. "We needed someone who would bring more than skills and a track record to the role--we needed someone we could count on to build on the great successes we had achieved without losing momentum or people who are important to us," Randel explained.

Schiller had an expanding track record in development but had not previously served as head of development at a major university. He had no significant ties to either the University of Chicago or the city's business and civic leadership. "In short, Ron was not the most obvious candidate for this position, but he had long impressed me with his special ability to spark and energize," Randel said.

Randel's bet has been paying off--the university's fund raising and other development achievements are greatly exceeding expectations. As a result of the big break, Schiller's personal abilities also took off--and with them, his contribution to the organization. His imagination and leadership has the entire university working in new ways, both with more collaboration and a new spirit of debate and healthy tension.

A signature of great leaders is the ability to spot unusually talented people and move them forward in unpredictable and often daring moves. In doing so, they can change the nature and direction of an organization and leave a sustained mark of excellence for generations to come.

[Saj-nicole Joni](#) is CEO of [Cambridge International Group](#).