



Honor Those That Help Guide You by Delivering Results and Helping Others

It's been said often in success byte interviews, "No one gets ahead without help." Heather Rivard, senior vice president distribution operations, DTE Energy repeated this important success principle to me when I interviewed her this fall, but she made the principle come alive for me and, now, I hope for you.

Perhaps you wouldn't think someone with a BS in aerospace engineering, an MBA, and a resume that includes being chair of Girl Scouts of Southeastern Michigan, would need help. After all, she oversees the company's electrical system construction, including new customer connects, distribution reliability planning and construction, distribution reliability-planning and construction, distribution contract management, vegetation management, and emergency responsiveness.

But, very early in our interview, she shared, "I always tried to take advice and counsel from a variety of people. I kept those relationships going over time. I was proactively working at getting the best guidance I could, often from people that were not officially my mentor. If I had not actively sought advice from a wide variety of people, they would not have offered help because I wasn't in their chain of command. I had to ask, but when I did, they were always very generous with their time and expertise."

How do you payback or pay forward that kind of help? Rivard advises, "Deliver results with the help that you have received. They will see that their investment in you paid off. What you accomplish benefits the whole organization. And, I have never said 'no' to anyone who asks me for help."

Being pro-active about preparing for future opportunities is another Rivard recommendation. "I took every opportunity to learn about the business, not just in the department I was in, but about how the entire company works. I never stayed put and just waited. At one point, I took a temporary opportunity for 2-3 months. As a result, I got to know some new, key people and because of my performance and our relationships, they kept me in mind for future roles. One of the people I worked with on some key strategy issues went on maternity leave and she recommended me so the work could continue. Because of her recommendation, I was able to demonstrate my skills to a very senior person. Even though it took a few years for the work I did on the temporary opportunity to result in a major promotion for me, those people I connected with earlier remembered me."

"I like to talk to the employees that are actually doing the work. I want to see the actual work done and try to understand what is happening. I do my best to listen to what our employees are saying and the ideas that they have about how to do things better, faster, safer. It's tempting to manage from a desk or a computer, but while I still don't get into the field enough, when I have, I always learn so much."

Not every boss is great. Rivard shared a story from her early career when her boss was not very motivating. "It was hard. But the experience taught me that you can learn from someone how not to lead. I learned how to be able to work under someone who I did not get on with. By reflecting on my situation, I thought about how I wanted to lead when I got the chance."

The consensus of the research work I have done with highly successful people like Rivard is that most people's weaknesses are not disastrous. They can find work arounds. Rivard agrees and adds, "It's important to understand your top strengths. For me and those that I mentor, I encourage people to focus there and leverage their strengths as opposed to repairing gaps and shortcomings."

"For my direct reports," observes Rivard, "Usually the best thing I can do is get out of their way. My key role is to keep us all orchestrated. I have multiple generations who report to me. Some leaders talk about the differences, but I am not noticing that. It's true that sometimes people get used to the way things are traditionally done and others are always ready to change, but each challenge may need a different approach, so solutions vary."

Advice for others? "Always be looking for mentors and opportunities to learn and demonstrate your skills. Take advantage of internal and external groups to network. I am working on increasing my own involvement, for example, in external industry things. I am now on the board of Midwest ENERGY Association (MEA), and I am also involved in AEIC—Association of Edison Illuminating Companies and EPRI-Electric Power Research Institute.

"I also counsel that all leaders have to be careful not to lose the human to human connection. More and more things are done remotely. But being on top of non-verbal communications and other signals is critical. Ultimately our business is about people, our customers, employees, our shareholders, and the broader communities that we serve."

It was a distinct pleasure for me to complete 10 years of interviewing highly successful people in our industry with my interview with Heather Rivard. Her outstanding educational background and her continuing high level performance has earned her a senior level position. My sense is, however, that her willingness to continue learning, gathering guidance from others, and passing on what she can to others will result in even greater success for DTE and for her.

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