

Opinion **Managing yourself**

Who helped you get where you are today, and why?

When you become lost and confused it is other people who pull you through, writes Margaret Heffernan

MARGARET HEFFERNAN



Successful careers and filmmaking depend on help and collaboration from others © FT

Margaret Heffernan MAY 8 2016

Who helped you in your career? This is one of my favourite interview questions to ask. What I'm trying to find out is: are you someone whom other people wish to help? If you are stuck, are you human or humble enough to ask for help?

I am less interested in the particulars of the response, but anyone who can't answer the question gets no further with me. People who think their success is attributable only to their own genius wreak havoc in organisations.

Successful careers depend on a vast, invisible infrastructure of parents, teachers, colleagues, bosses, friends, spouses and mentors. If a complete stranger had not explained how a US high school graduate could enter the British education system, if my father had not stood up to the High Mistress who insisted I was not university material, if my first boss had not given me a great project and his PA had not explained the costs of shooting on film, if a friend's husband had not made an introduction when I moved to the US, I dread to think what I might be doing today. Some of their help was enlightened self-interest of course. But the chief beneficiary was me.

I started to think about this recently while working with mid-level executives eager to [make it to the top](#). Highly focused on their own achievements and worth, they imagine that drive and talent will deliver their success — because it always has. At school, good grades were theirs alone. At university too.

And it is sadly likely that many have worked for companies that use all the performance management tools we've come to know and hate that concentrate attention on individual expertise. But sooner or later, to have impact, to build trust, for anybody to want to work with them, they will need luck and they will need help.

One chief executive I knew routinely introduced young aspirants to people who could help them. This was a deliberate test: he wanted to know which of his people were curious and open enough to learn from others and to inspire their generosity. More than a few did nothing with their introductions; in the excellence of others, all they could [see were rivals](#). The successful ones did the opposite, investing time and attention in anyone from whom they could learn.

The very best were smart enough to ignore status: they knew they could learn from everybody.

Nowhere is this more true than in the realm of innovation. I spend a lot of time talking to scientists because they do what all entrepreneurs do: identify hard problems and solve them, in a highly competitive environment. They collaborate because it is impossible to know enough alone. But the most successful are not just utilitarian. They know that when you are doing ambitious work that matters, sooner or later you are going to become lost and confused — and it is going to be the support and contributions from other people that pulls you through. That support can take many guises: it might be a pep talk or a stiff drink, but it is as likely to be a good argument that dislodges assumptions or retrieves insights you were too panic-stricken to recall. Without these people, you can forget your breakthrough.

This seems so obvious that I'm still amazed when I encounter people who cannot answer my simple question: who helped them? One was a television producer whose first film I supervised. I thought his inability to ask for help, or accept it, was a sign of youth. But 25 years later, nothing has changed — except his career has proved strikingly itinerant; apparently, no company likes having him around for long.

Just last month, I watched in horror as a senior executive, onstage at a company conference, was asked who had helped him — and he had no answer. Neither did he fully appreciate how profoundly his silence alienated his audience.

When I finish a new book, the fun part is always writing the acknowledgments. I try to keep track of everyone who has helped along the way, from the woman at a county fair who loaned me paper and a pen, to the academics who generously shared their knowledge and their time, and the friends who endured my monomania.

When I buy a book, the acknowledgments are the pages I turn to first. I want to know where the author comes from and that is where I find out; indebtedness is more eloquent than any CV. So it might not be a bad idea for executives to do the same thing from time to time: sit down and map out all the people who helped you get where you are today.

Psychologists say that gratitude is good for you. But the exercise might also prove a timely reminder that we are all responsible to more than just ourselves.

The writer is an entrepreneur, consultant and author of 'A Bigger Prize' and 'Wilful Blindness'

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Lucy Kellaway is away

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