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Wanna Move Up? Act Up!

Career counselor Barbara Moses wants you to become a career activist:
"Every aspect of your work can be changed for the better."

by Ron Lieber
photographs by Edward Gajdel
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Barbara Moses is not your standard-issue career counselor. She doesn't help her clients to move up the ladder. Instead, she helps them to act up on their own behalf. She argues that the new world of work calls for a new approach to careers -- an approach that she calls "career activism."

What makes a career activist? "They're thoughtful, vigilant, sometimes cocky, maybe even a little paranoid," Moses says. "They define themselves independently from their organization and take charge of their own career choices."

Moses's firm, BBM Human Resource Consultants Inc., based in Toronto, has taught career self-management to people from top companies such as Levi Strauss, Lucent Technologies, Four Seasons Regent Hotels, and PricewaterhouseCoopers LLP. Her "Career Planning Workbook," first offered in 1982 (she updates it every five years), has been used by nearly 1 million people in more than 1,000 organizations. Her new book, "Career Intelligence: The 12 New Rules for Work and Life Success" (Berrett-Koehler, 1998), outlines tactics for career activists.

In an interview, Moses explained the virtues of acting up in your career.

How do you know a career activist when you see one?

Being an activist means that you stop, reflect, and look for meaning in everything you do. Activists also know how to protest. You don't have to be shrill, but you should assume that every aspect of your work can be changed for the better. Career activists try hard to improve their lives at work.

Do you need to be brash to become a career activist?

Not necessarily. The problem that most people have at work is that they're always playing a role. I used to work for an oil company where all of the women wore box-shaped suits and bow ties. I can't imagine spending so much money on something so hideous. Part of "wearing the uniform" involves checking your personality at the door. Once that happens, you become merely pleasant. But "pleasant" isn't always very interesting. It doesn't give people a compelling reason to work on your projects or to be on your team. If you can engage people by expressing who you are, then they'll be excited to work with you.

What's one thing that career activists do differently from other people?

Networking. Most networking is too parochial. We tend to hang around with people who are like us -- people who make us feel good by virtue of our association with them: If you're an actuary and you spend time with other actuaries, that must make you a pretty with-it actuary. Trouble is, if there's a downturn, the only people you'll know will be unemployed actuaries.

Career activists use networking to learn about other industries and to meet people from different businesses. Actuaries ought to be, say, reading fashion magazines or talking to people from brokerage houses.

What's another career-planning mind flip that people should know about?

The best new job may be in your current company. People often overestimate how much fun people at other companies are having. If you believe that everyone else is having a ball, then you're bound to become demoralized and to start looking elsewhere. But once you see that things aren't better elsewhere, you'll be able to look around your own organization with a clearer head. Your problem may have more to do with what you do than with where you do it. That's a problem that career activism can often fix.

You can learn more about Barbara Moses and BBM Human Resource Consultants Inc. on the Web (www.bbmcareerdev.com).

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