

Jean Thompson on Getting Out of a Rut

I've always been told that the ticket to career advancement and higher earning power is a master's degree. My experience has confirmed this to be true in many fields. It is not, however, the only way to get ahead. There's another way, and I stumbled upon it quite unexpectedly. I call it "earning a master's degree on the street."

After toiling as a metropolitan newspaper reporter and editor for about six years, I suddenly woke up feeling restless—bored, actually. Others might think that reporting is endlessly exciting. While it is true that every story presents a new challenge, the process of newsgathering and writing can begin to feel routine.

My performance reviews were adequate, my work record clean. I was not the office wizard or prize-winner, but I was a solid workhorse on whom editors could rely to keep the pages filled. That's good enough for lots of people, yet in time I realized it was not good enough for me. I wanted a greater role in decisions that shaped the daily newspaper and public opinion. How to escape this rut?

One answer might be to enroll in a master's program. Unfortunately, with a mortgage and family-planning issues looming, graduate school teased me from just out of reach. Perhaps I could attend one or two classes on weekends or evenings, just to recharge my battery, I thought. But which classes would benefit me most? I felt trapped.

Meanwhile, I became increasingly resentful as I watched people with less seniority advance to more interesting and better paying assignments. During a phone call with a friend who had a job in upper management, I groused, “What do they know that I don’t?” “Find out,” she demanded, putting me on the spot.

That was the day my fortunes turned: my first day of “school.” Now, I’ll admit, in the beginning I wasn’t just startled by my friend’s prodding, I was miffed. I interpreted that challenge as a dare, or worse, an accusation.

She was forcing me to look within, to honestly assess what I knew, who I knew and what I knew how to do. I might have to approach people who had leapfrogged over me, or the bosses who promoted them, to get the answers to my questions. Damn!

I dawdled a while but the next time we talked my friend asked again if I had found out what key information I was missing. Finally, looking at myself in the mirror, I asked myself what I was waiting for. How would a reporter handle this assignment if she were writing a story about getting ahead? Who would she interview? What questions would she ask?

Before long, I had a mental list, and soon, a notebook full of questions that I wanted answered: What are the major attributes of leaders in my company? Where did they go to school? What classes helped them most? What would they study today if they could? To whom do they turn when they get stumped? (They’re only human, I figured.) What do I have to learn and who do I have to know in the organization? Do they belong to certain clubs or professional societies? What do they read? How do they keep learning?

I made a short list of people in the company who seemed approachable (and a few who absolutely terrified me but who seemed always to be at the center of major happenings). I put some of my ambitious peers on the list, and some of the rising stars. One was a high-ranking manager who had always claimed to practice an open-door policy; I decided to call his bluff. And I put my own boss on the list, out of respect, because I knew that she’d get wind of it when I started quizzing people

up the ladder from her.

It took me a while to summon the courage to start interviewing. I know that sounds strange coming from a reporter, but this wasn't any old story. First, I had to get my emotions in the right place. I had to be ready to hear whatever critique of my skills and performance might be dished out. Don't ask a question if you're afraid of the answer.

And so it began. Some people had little to say. Some gave me insights on the company that I never expected to hear. Remarkably, almost everyone I approached was flattered to be asked for advice. They enjoyed talking about themselves and their achievements. A few were snippy, and one blew me off. I guess they felt I was asking for some secret recipe.

My boss was surprised and a little suspicious, but ultimately encouraging. She told me that she had noticed my weeks-long depression and had not known how to motivate me. Once I identified for her what was wrong, she was able to give me suggestions on how to put some bounce back in my productivity.

In all, this informal interviewing took about a week (I deliberately tried to get it over with so it would not look like some type of campaign or malingering). Some chats were after hours, some during quick coffee breaks. A few of the interviews with executives required appointments.

I followed up with quick thank-you notes and then sat down alone in a favorite restaurant with my brimming notebooks. I soon discovered that people who advanced in my company had several traits in common:

- ♦ They were readers. Voracious readers. Some methodically read two to five newspapers a day, dissecting and comparing as they went. Many enjoyed fiction, but most consumed nonfiction, especially those who saw themselves as becoming experts in a given subject. Acquiring expertise in some body of knowledge mattered, and it didn't seem to matter what the subject was so much as how deeply the person came to know and understand it. No matter what field they were interested in, they all