

Nepotism Pays  
By Keith Ferrazzi  
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Ever heard that hard work leads to success? Apparently, that's wrong.

Last month, our poll revealed that Inc.com readers believe the number one reason people get ahead in a company is NEPOTISM. In fact, 48% believe that being the boss's son is the secret to getting ahead, while only 25% said success comes from doing good work. So, is that cynicism or just the naked truth? Probably both. Come on, do you really think that back in 1956, Thomas Watson, Jr., was the best qualified out of 72,500 employees to run IBM? Or that Bill Ford, Jr., today, is the sharpest and best leader at Ford? No way. It's just the way it is. Does that mean you should be defeatist and hang it up if you're not a Watson or a Ford or a Murdoch? No, but definitely quit whining that they got the jobs and you didn't. Instead, do something about it.

You might say, "But Keith, my parents didn't own a Fortune 500 company." Well, neither did mine. My parents were blue-collar workers through and through. The trick is, I found that it's possible to create your own nepotism. Here, I'll explain.

Results of poll: What factor do you think more often leads to getting ahead at a company?

- 6% Seniority
  - 26% Doing good work
  - 48% Connections (they're the boss's son, e.g.)
  - 18% Being well-liked

The first step is to think about what nepotism is all about. It's about having three things. 1) Superior ACCESS to people in power, 2) The deepest CARE and concern from those people who can speed you to success, and then, and only then, 3) Sufficient SKILL. Access, care, and skill -- that's the recipe. Now, let's follow that recipe to create success just like the sons of Rupert Murdoch have.

## **Access**

No matter how good you are, unless the people in power (those who can give you what you want) know who you are, you'll stay a loser (by the way, I define loser as someone who achieves significantly below their desired potential). The people in power need to know who you are and what you can do, or I guarantee

they won't think of you when handing out that next opportunity. Being the kid of the owner or the rich and famous automatically grants you that kind of recognition and gives you the access to power required for success. But you don't necessarily have to be born with access. You can get it on your own.

To gain your own access, you have to make sure the people in power know your name, hear your name, read your name, and dream your name, all just so it's possible for them to eventually say your name when it counts. As in, "I think (your name) should be our next VP of Sales."

## Care

Once you have access, you are far from finished. It's just not enough that the powerful people know you. They have to like you and genuinely care about you enough to feel compelled (even emotionally moved) to give you what you want. To create that level of care, though, you have to develop a deep and real relationship. Now, you cannot bluff your way to this kind of emotional connection. You have to develop and work on it like any other important emotional relationship in your life - including that with your parents. I don't know about you, but my relationship with my mom sure requires work.

As I write this, I think of a really smart woman who works at one of my client companies. She is absolutely an aggressive networker, so she gets plenty of access to powerful people inside her company. But she can't get those people to care for her. She spends so much time pushing her bullheaded agenda and so little time thinking about making others around her a success, that her peers and superiors are flat-out turned off. As a result, she will clearly fail to create her own nepotism.

I also think about some of the mail I get from young people asking me to advise them. It's not enough to get access and then, for example, just ask a decision-maker to be your mentor. You have to reciprocate by actually engaging in your role as the mentee. You have to have plenty of candid, two-way, give-and-receive discussions and legitimately become intimate friends for the terms mentor and mentee to mean anything. But, the great news is that if you really commit to the relationship, you'll end up with the emotional bond/care that you need to succeed and the realization (it will become obvious) that the primary benefit you got from the courtship was the relationship itself.

When I was at Deloitte Consulting, there were two men, Pat Laconto and Bob Kirk, who cared a great deal about me, and they paved my path to becoming partner. I am very grateful for their help with accelerating my career, despite

some big bumps in the road. But in the end, I am more thankful for the deeply caring relationships I had and have with Pat and Bob to this day.

Now, you might say, "I hate the guy or gal who is one of the gatekeepers to my dreams." Fine. Find another. I've had immediate bosses that didn't get me, but that didn't mean that I couldn't develop deeper relationships with their bosses. There is no hard and fast rule that your boss has to be one of your strongest advocates in the company, just that the people who are can actually do something about it. It certainly helps to have your boss on your side, but the important thing to remember is that genuine, mutual, caring relationships with decision-makers are required to create your own nepotism and move ahead.

## **Skill**

Once you've gained the access and care that you'll need, then, and only then, does skill come into play. Of course, if you are a schlock and cannot rub two brain cells together, you probably won't get much access in the first place. You do have to be good enough to have a strong shot at success. But you don't have to be the very best qualified with the biggest and baddest résumé!

I was made CMO of Deloitte before I was 30. Was I the most super-duper marketer? Heck, I was just a green kid with a really strong marketing instinct and a good track record in previous, less significant jobs. What mattered most was the trust and faith of the CEO that I could do the job and do the job in the way he wanted to see it done. And how did I get that? By creating my own nepotism.