

Viewpoint

DETOUR YOUR WAY TO THE CEO SPOT

Three ways to strengthen your career path by deviating from it



Do you hope to become chief executive of a respected industrial company someday? Don't assume that by vigorously applying your core strengths and learning every-

thing there is to know about your industry you will climb the leadership ladder all the way to the C-suite.

Talk with CEOs across industries, and you soon realize that the route to the corner office often involves some uncomfortable detours. Take them. I recommend three in particular.

First, detour out of your geographical comfort zone. Scan the top 100 companies on the 2011 IndustryWeek U.S. 500, and you'll see that a quarter of the manufacturing CEOs worked and lived outside the U.S. in the course of their careers.

When Rakesh Sachdev, now CEO of Sigma-Aldrich (SIAL), was with Cummins (CMI), he moved to Mexico, though he knew no Spanish at the time. When he was with ArvinMeritor (ARM), he worked in China. "My four years in Beijing were perhaps the most formative of my career," he says. "I was immersed in a frenzied emerging market, which might have proved bewildering to some, but it still energizes me two decades later."

Dinesh Paliwal, chairman and CEO of Harman International (HAR), a maker of audio and infotainment systems, says that no textbook

can fully prepare you for, say, conducting negotiations in Stockholm, where you need to build a consensus at all costs, or Stuttgart, where you have to dot the i's and cross the t's, or Tokyo, where you must bow frequently.

"My experiences in navigating different countries and cultures are a highlight of my career," he says.

Today, he looks for global business experience in every hiring decision. "Among my dozen direct reports at Harman, seven different nationalities are represented," he says. "All have lived and worked in multiple countries."

OTHER INDUSTRIES, OTHER JOBS

Second, detour out of your industry comfort zone. A full third of the manufacturing CEOs on the IndustryWeek U.S. 500 previously worked in an industry other than the one in which they currently are a chief executive. When Sachdev came to Sigma-Aldrich as CFO in 2008, he was stepping out of the automotive sector, where he had worked for decades, into specialty chemicals and life sciences.

Before Mark Blinn joined Flowserve (FLS), a manufacturer of fluid motion and control products where he is now CEO, he worked in technology services (EDS), homebuilding (Centex), and consumer services (FedEx Kinko's). "I went into each new setting with extreme curiosity," he says. "It can be a mistake to look too quickly for the next move, but when I saw a new learning environment where I could grow, I didn't hesitate."

Finally, detour out of your competency comfort zone. Many CEOs will tell you that if you feel comfortable in your role, it's probably time to take on a new challenge.

"When I was 43 years old," recalls John Williamson, CEO of Atkore International Holdings, a maker of galvanized steel tubes, pipes, and building components, "I was considered the best operations guy at Danaher, a company known for operations. I felt very confident, very secure. But I intentionally moved myself out of what I knew best into a very different kind of job at ITT."

He says that in that new corporate role, as opposed to an operational role, he had to develop a whole new set of skills, especially the ability to influence others, since he had little formal authority. "I was helped along by some great mentoring from my CEO," he says, "and I was afforded a bird's eye view of the CEO's role."

Within a couple of years he moved into general manager positions to run global businesses for ITT, demonstrating his readiness for a top job. "Based on my own experience," he says, "I'd advise anyone who aims to be a CEO to let go of what you're great at and be brutally honest with yourself about where you're weak. Don't hide your deficiencies. Attack them."

By Sanjay Gupta

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