

Assembling Your Personal Board of Advisors

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BY YAN SHEN, RICHARD D. COTTON AND KATHY E. KRAM

MANY STUDIES HAVE SHOWN the importance of mentoring and coaching in supporting individuals' career and personal growth. However, changes in the career landscape in recent years, including global mobility, an increasingly diverse workforce, shortened job tenures and the extensive use of technology, present managers with unprecedented complexity and uncertainty. The notion that one mentor can meet all of an individual's developmental needs is often inconceivable.¹ Instead, there are a number of network support roles beyond that of formal mentor. As individuals change roles, occupations, industries or organizations, or relocate to different countries, they need to build a "personal board of advisors" that fits their careers and their busy lives.

Just as corporations configure networks to deal with the variety of problems and opportunities faced by knowledge workers,² individuals need to configure their networks based on their needs and the resource commitments involved in building such relationships.

Research on developmental networks has primarily focused on the content of career and psychosocial support³ and how protégés benefit from multiple developmental relationships.⁴ We extend this research to focus on three questions:

1. How can personal board-of-advisor roles be differentiated into types of roles that can serve as a starting point for individuals to assess and configure their personal boards of advisors?
2. What skills are necessary to identify potential personal advisory board members and to build this network to fit an individual's developmental needs?



THE LEADING QUESTION

How can you assemble an effective personal board of advisors?

FINDINGS

- ▶ **The notion that one mentor can meet all of an individual's developmental needs is increasingly outdated.**
- ▶ **There are a number of network support roles beyond that of formal mentor.**
- ▶ **Your personal board of advisors can encompass a range of individuals — from friends or family who provide emotional support to role models you may not personally know.**

3. What happens if there are gaps between one's career and personal development needs and the support one gets from advisors?

In developing the framework for this article, we conducted three studies. (See "About the Research.") First, we conducted in-depth interviews with 64 expatriates in China and Singapore about their developmental relationships. Second, we studied the induction speeches of people admitted into occupational and industry halls of fame for insights into the questions noted above. Our third study focused on a cross-industry sample of managers, executives and professionals and the relationships they had with their personal boards of advisors. That study validated the role typology we had identified in the previous two studies and provided further insights into high-potential sources of advisors and into the time and effort required to cultivate these different relationships (for instance, the type of support provided, the frequency of interaction and the desired relationship closeness). These findings offer important implications for both individuals and organizations.

Six Types of Supporters

Our studies of expats and "Hall of Famers" showed that the individuals sought career and psychosocial support from multiple people. Most of the members of these individuals' personal boards of advisors played an active role in supporting the individuals' career and personal development. However, both the

expats and the Hall of Famers also mentioned the importance of people who had passed away but continued to motivate and inspire them.

Our findings offer a protégé-based typology of supporters that is different from those developed by previous mentoring studies⁵ and that strongly suggests the need to expand the traditional boundaries of developmental relationships to encompass a broader set of relationships. This more expansive definition of developmental relationships includes those who take an active interest in the protégé and take actions to advance his or her career⁶ as well as those who are perceived as critically important influences but who do not necessarily have frequent interaction or even particular closeness with the protégé. Indeed, the connections may be to unmet heroes or even to an *anti*-role model (a person whom the protégé emphatically *doesn't* want to be like).

Based on the kind of support the person provided (career and/or psychosocial) and the nature of the interaction with the protégé (the frequency and/or closeness), we identified six types of personal board members: personal guides, personal advisors, full-service mentors, career advisors, career guides and role models. Both the type of support provided and the nature of the interaction are critical to understanding the different sources of support that personal advisory board members offer and the potential effort typically involved in developing and maintaining the different relationships. (See "Six Types of Personal Advisory Board Members.")

ABOUT THE RESEARCH

In the first part of our research, we drew on two studies of developmental networks to create our typology. The first was an in-depth interview study with 64 expatriate professionals and managers in Singapore and China. The second was an archival study of speeches by 176 career achievers who were inducted into athletic and professional halls of fame. Both studies offer rich accounts of how developmental relationships unfolded and clear pictures of the developmental networks of study participants. The qualitative examples are based on extensive analysis of the two data sets.

In the expatriate study, more than one-third of the interviewees were American expatriates, and the rest were from 19 other countries.

The interviewees were asked, "Who has been important in your career and personal

development during the current assignment?" They were asked to describe each relationship in detail and to draw a visual depiction of their network structure. (Note: In this article, we give pseudonyms to the expatriates quoted.) Both qualitative and quantitative approaches were used to identify recurrent patterns, triangulate the data and deepen our understanding of the developmental network structures and the kind of support provided by each of the relationships described. The career achiever study was designed to investigate the content and structure of career-spanning developmental networks that led to extraordinary career achievement. We were especially interested in how the networks varied and the different kinds of support provided. We gathered, transcribed and coded the induction speeches to map the networks.

In addition to the first two studies, we

sought to validate our typology by studying a representative sample of professionals, managers and executives in various industries. We surveyed 315 alumni from two Northeastern U.S. universities to learn about their developmental relationships. Respondents ranged in age from 22 to 67 years; the average age was 42. The sample was 55.9% male, 44.1% female and 90.7% white/Caucasian. On average, respondents had worked in their career field for 16.4 years and their organization for 8.5 years and had held their current job for 5.6 years. They had an average of 4.9 members on their personal boards of advisors. Respondents were asked to identify individuals to whom they attributed their career success and to answer questions about the frequency and closeness of interactions and types of support they received from their advisors.

TYPE I: Personal Guides A personal guide is someone who had a supportive relationship with the protégé in the past, but the two have limited or no current interaction. Personal guides may have been closer to the protégé in an earlier period, but now they are mainly considered to be sources of psychosocial support as role models or as sources of motivation and inspiration.

We may see each other once in a year or maybe longer, but when we get back together again, it's as if that time hasn't passed. While they might not be an active support structure for me ... they're the people that I draw my inspiration and support from.

— Tony, expat in Singapore

For example, baseball shortstop Ozzie Smith credited the teachings of his college coach, Berdy Harr, with the mantra that he used throughout his 18-year professional career. As Smith recalled, “Berdy ... taught me the value of a great personal work ethic. ... It was because of him that I developed this saying: ‘That absolutely nothing is good enough if it can be made better, and better is never good enough if it can be made best.’”

TYPE II: Personal Advisors Personal advisors frequently interact with protégés outside of work. Individuals often rely on personal advisors for active psychosocial support; for example, they may serve as an emotional outlet or sounding board, offer friendship and/or provide acceptance and confirmation of one’s capabilities.

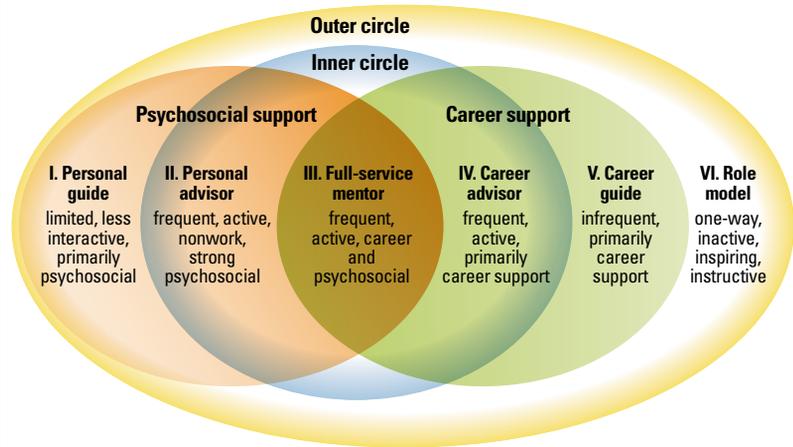
She is the person I can talk to when I'm happy or sad. She always listens and is not judgmental. ... She loves you even (when) you are not perfect. She hears what you say, and accepts you with your flaws.

— Peter, expat in China

TYPE III: Full-Service Mentors Full-service mentors, or “true mentors,”⁷ provide the protégé with a wide range of career and psychosocial support. Findings from our research showed that these relationships are usually with people outside the protégé’s current workplace, are characterized by strong closeness and

SIX TYPES OF PERSONAL ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS

Developmental relationships within the inner circle are closer and have more frequent interaction, typically providing greater levels of support. Those within the outer circle (but outside of the inner circle) are less close and have less frequent interaction, typically providing more focused support in a particular area. Less interactive advisors — those who are principally important as role models for the protégé — are located in the white space within the outer circle. Overlapping support circles indicate multiple kinds of support provided.



frequent interaction and involve supporters who provide extensive and complementary support.

Walt Hriniak is the ... single most important person in my baseball life. He taught me a lot of things ... most of all, be honest to yourself. Man, the time we spent in the bowels of every stadium, the sweat, the blood, the tears, the conversation, the relationship, the friendship, the closeness.

— Carlton Fisk,
2000 Baseball Hall of Fame

TYPE IV: Career Advisors Career advisors have high levels of interaction with the protégé. Their support is predominantly instrumental and career-related, involving job or professional needs. As a result, these relationships tend to be shorter in duration.

Those three were in senior roles and also supporters of mine in terms of what I did ... and they were aware of my strengths and weaknesses and were able to position me in parts of the business that hopefully showed up my strengths and also helped me deal with my weaknesses.

— Ray, expat in Singapore

With the support of a visionary supervisor, Gareth Lloyd, I, as a 24-year-old newly minted electrical engineer, got a chance . . . of pursuing the idea of a portable handheld electronic still camera. The year we spent in the small lab was full of experimentation, failure and some prayer.

— *Steven Sasson,*
2007 Consumer Electronics Hall of Fame

TYPE V: Career Guides Career guides have limited interaction with the individual or have fairly limited relationships. Their involvement in the person’s professional/personal development is often triggered by specific events — for example, a crisis or a critical career change. They step in only if and when developmental assistance is needed.⁸ Although the relationship may have evolved from close, regular interaction to more occasional interaction (perhaps due to career or geographic shifts), this type of advisor still maintains considerable influence.

I was a scared rookie . . . doubting my ability. . . I said, “I need help. I don’t think I can play in the big leagues.” [Ted Williams, the legendary hitter] flew into Boston, worked with me for three days, helped me mentally [and] gave me confidence that I could play in the big leagues.

— *Carl Yastrzemski,*
1989 Baseball Hall of Fame

TYPE VI: Role Models Our research findings suggest that important developmental relationships don’t have to be close or even direct.⁹ In particular, the interaction between a protégé and his/her role model (or, in some cases, an anti-role model) tends to be passive or even nonexistent.

After seeing his role for the last couple of years, I realized that I would not want to do that role. But he is someone who has even more international and cultural experience than I do. . . . So it’s been a great experience to watch him and learn from him also.

— *Tom, expat in Singapore*

One [source of success] is certainly the footsteps in which I follow, including several people from Procter & Gamble, two of whom I count as among

the greatest role models in my life. One [is] William Cooper Procter, [Procter & Gamble CEO, 1907-1930], whom of course I did not know.

— *John Pepper, former Procter & Gamble CEO, 2008 U.S. Business Hall of Fame*

Validating the Six Categories

As part of our research, we sought to validate our six personal advisory board member categories through survey responses from a data set representing managers, executives and professionals across industries. In analyzing the composition of the personal boards of advisors of this sample, our aim was to foster greater understanding of how protégé-advisor interactions actually occur.¹⁰

In assessing their support networks, survey respondents used all six categories, with each category reflecting differing characteristics. (See “The Characteristics of Personal Advisory Board Relationships,” p.86.) The findings validated the typology identified in our previous two studies and offered more details in terms of the type of support provided and the frequency and closeness of interaction for each type of advisor. In addition, we found that relationships can change from one category to another as closeness and interactions wax and wane due to changes in an individual’s work or life circumstances. For example, the development of a personal friendship over time was found to be an important step associated with supporters moving from being guides or advisors to full-service mentors. There are also relationships that, for various reasons, are characterized by less frequent interaction over time. Such relationships are still important but may not be available without the depth of the prior interactions; after all, it takes a long time to grow an old friend.

In contrast to the view that networking should be constant to be effective, our results indicated that a more strategic and targeted approach to leveraging relationships may tend to be more prudent. Indeed, the survey findings showed that some of the best sources of developmental support were personal friends, manager/supervisors, business associates, informal mentors and spouses/life partners. Seven relationship types (superiors, work teammates, manager/supervisors, former work colleagues, business associates, informal mentors and close and

distant personal friends) accounted for 65.7% of all of the survey respondents' personal advisory board members. This indicates that tapping into relationships with individuals one already knows may be an especially good way to develop and enhance one's personal board of advisors.¹¹

The Importance of Fit

Thus far we have shown that individuals can draw career and psychosocial support from multiple sources, including professional contacts, relatives and friends. Since building multiple effective relationships often requires both time and resources, individuals should consider how to secure the right personal advisory board members and how to build a developmental network that is aligned with their needs and the time and energy they have to develop the level of closeness and interaction needed to maintain a sustainable personal board of advisors. The fit between an individual's needs and the network structure (that is, the match between what individuals need for their careers and psychosocial support, and what they get from their advisors) is important.¹²

The work of maintaining this strong fit should continue over the long run, through strategic reassessment and renewal. A person's developmental network can't be static but needs to evolve over time, based on one's awareness of the missing links between his or her needs and what his or her current personal advisory board members offer. Self-awareness is critical in order to make timely and appropriate network adjustments. As the first component of emotional intelligence, self-awareness involves a deep understanding of one's moods, emotions, strengths, weaknesses, needs and effect on others.¹³ It also involves having a clear sense of one's personal goals.¹⁴

Creative success depends on mentors and supporters. ... It's obvious you don't accomplish these things in isolation. You do it with a lot of support. I had a lot of it because I needed it.

— **Thomas Fogarty, holder of more than 70 medical device patents, 2001 National Inventors Hall of Fame**

However, self-awareness alone is insufficient. An individual also needs to be able to adapt as new

developmental needs and priorities become evident¹⁵ or when the external environment changes (for example, when relocating to a different culture or competing at a higher level).

Self-awareness and relational competence represent two sides of the same coin. The former enables individuals to get an accurate picture of what they need, while the latter enables them to initiate and cultivate effective relationships with the supporters they need.¹⁶ Our studies of expats and Hall of Famers suggested that individuals who had a strong ability to relate to people found it easier to initiate and cultivate new relationships, secure a wider range of career and psychosocial support from personal advisory board members and provide benefits to those supporters, as well.

I always think about relationships in terms of interdependence, in terms of what I can give and what I can receive from relationships. ... It is codevelopmental in that we are all interdependent, and we develop through mutual interaction.

— **Tom, expat in Singapore**

The Impact of Organizational Context

An organization's culture and practices may impose constraints or parameters that shape individuals' developmental networks and influence their efforts to build relationships and provide developmental support.¹⁷ Our studies indicate that individuals tend to have a high percentage of advisors or guides within the protégé's work organization when the organization has a strong developmental culture that emphasizes, rewards and encourages collaboration, formal and informal mentoring and/or coaching, along with regular feedback and developmental planning.

A strong developmental culture increases the chances for an individual to initiate developmental relationships with coworkers who can provide much-needed psychosocial and career support, particularly if the individual wants his or her career to continue in that organization or industry. In addition, this type of culture facilitates the relationship-building process and encourages mutually beneficial interactions. We have seen over and over again that when organizations create opportunities

THE CHARACTERISTICS OF PERSONAL ADVISORY BOARD RELATIONSHIPS

As part of our research, we conducted a study of the personal boards of advisors of 315 managers, professionals and executives. The characteristics we studied indicate the relative interaction frequency, relationship closeness, support provided and most common supporter roles by category.

SUPPORTER CATEGORY	NO. (%) OF PERSONAL ADVISORY BOARD MEMBERS	AVG. TALK FREQUENCY*	AVG. RELATIONSHIP CLOSENESS**	AVG. CAREER SUPPORT***	AVG. PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT***	AVG. YEARS KNOWN	AVG. YEARS AS DEVELOPER TO PROTÉGÉ
I. Personal guide	23 (1.5%)	2.74	1.91	3.00	3.92	9.52	7.48
II. Personal advisor	332 (21.3%)	4.96	2.97	2.86	3.68	12.04	8.90
III. Full-service mentor	765 (49.2%)	5.03	3.39	4.20	4.31	14.00	11.75
IV. Career advisor	210 (13.5%)	4.91	2.68	3.76	3.02	6.47	4.86
V. Career guide	45 (2.9%)	2.78	1.84	3.87	2.97	7.76	4.28
VI. Role model	181 (11.6%)	2.12	1.69	3.30	3.38	9.57	6.97
TOTAL	100.0%	4.56	2.93	3.72	3.85	11.80	9.37

* **Talk Frequency Scale:** 1 = Not at all; 2 = Every few years; 3 = Every few months; 4 = Monthly; 5 = Weekly; 6 = Daily

** **Closeness Scale:** 1 = Distant; 2 = Less than close; 3 = Close; 4 = Very close

*** **Career and Psychosocial Support Scales:** 1 = Strongly Disagree; 2 = Disagree; 3 = Neutral; 4 = Agree; 5 = Strongly Agree, from modified Mentoring Functions Questionnaire (MFQ) scale¹

for employees to develop self-awareness and the relational skills necessary to build developmental relationships, those individuals report enlisting others in their developmental networks.

The Trouble With Poor Fit

A poor fit between an individual’s needs and his or her existing personal board of advisors can be divided into two parts: a lack of fit for career support (poor fit between desired and actual career support) and a lack of fit for psychosocial support (poor fit between desired and actual psychosocial support). This relates not only to the quantity and quality of the support provided but also the time and energy

available to cultivate that support. Our studies suggest that this type of poor fit can lead to negative outcomes. Consider the following three examples.

1. Lack of career support can lead to low organizational commitment and voluntary turnover.

While in his early 40s, Jack was assigned by his employer to Singapore, where he remained for three years. At the time of our interview, he was considering a career change, citing what he saw as a poor fit with the job and a lack of career support from his peers and supervisors. His developmental network did not include any important members within his organization. A few months later Jack made the decision to leave the company:

MOST COMMON ROLES

1. Distant personal friend (5)
2. Informal mentor (4)
3. Business associate (2), counselor (2), former work colleague (2)

1. Close personal friend (63)
2. Business associate (47)
3. Work teammate (40)

1. Close personal friend (164)
2. Spouse or life partner (102)
3. Informal mentor (79)

1. Manager/supervisor (52)
2. Business associate (26), superior (26)
3. Informal mentor (14)

1. Former work colleague (10)
2. Distant personal friend (4), informal mentor (4), personal acquaintance (4), work teammate (4)

1. Former work colleague (36)
2. Unmet hero/idol/no current relationship (33)
3. Business associate (21)

You'll find that I actually almost have no one who's a peer or someone within the (organization). ... I don't feel any institutional loyalty because there's just not people around to mentor or provide guidance. ... It's a pity that I have to look to the past for help and guidance.

2. Lack of career and psychosocial support can lead to poor adjustment to a new environment and relocation dissatisfaction. Emma was in her mid-30s when her employers assigned her to Singapore, where she confronted many conflicts and challenges in terms of both the work and the culture. Although Emma was in Singapore, most of

her personal advisory board members were based in the United States: Only one person was from Singapore. Within her network there were no expat advisors, either. Moreover, she received little guidance from her employer. Neither her supporters nor her employer did much to facilitate the cultural transition. Although Emma was able to get career and psychosocial support from her previously established network, in Singapore, she noted, "I'm kind of like shooting in the dark here."

3. Lack of career and psychosocial support can lead to underperformance and involuntary turnover. Frank Robinson was 30 when the Cincinnati Reds baseball team traded him to the Baltimore Orioles because the Reds owner saw him as "a fading talent increasingly hobbled by leg injuries"¹⁸ and an "old 30."¹⁹ Though Robinson had helped the Reds get to the World Series and won individual awards, he needed support to develop his best talents. Playing for Baltimore, Robinson won batting's coveted Triple Crown, and Baltimore went to the playoffs in four of his six years with the team and to the World Series three times (including one World Series that resulted in a rewarding victory over Robinson's former team, the Reds). In Robinson's view, the difference was in the Orioles' developmental culture:

Not only was I walking into a good ball club, and being associated with some outstanding individuals [but] I was walking into a great situation as far as an organization is concerned. ... As a player I must say those ... [were] the happiest years of my playing career.

Even though Robinson played in Cincinnati three years longer than he played in Baltimore, the only person he mentioned from Cincinnati when being inducted into the Baseball Hall of Fame was an anti-mentor (the team owner); by contrast, he cited five people from the Baltimore Orioles, including the owner, Jerry Hofberger:

What stands out in my mind about this man is that he cared about his ballplayers' personal life. And just an example, after a ball game he would come in the clubhouse every night he was in the city, and he wouldn't come over and slap you on the back and say, "Nice

game-winning home run” ... or whatever. He wouldn’t do that. The first words out of his mouth were, “How are you? How’s the family? Is there anything that I can do for you?” And that to me was the greatest significant [thing] that an owner of a ball club could do for me.

Implications for Organizations

Our studies underline the importance of informal support from colleagues within an individual’s organization to the individual’s career and personal growth. This is not surprising. However, we also highlight the value of having a variety of personal advisory board members, providing different kinds of support from different social realms. For organizations, this points to the importance of shifting from a focus on mentoring and coaching to embracing the broader use of developmental networks to enhance individual and organizational performance and career satisfaction. By recognizing the potential of developmental networks and personal boards of advisors, organizations and managers can help lead in the “shift from managing the star to managing the star’s network.”²⁰ Within this new environment, the focus is on fostering protégé-supporter relationships within organizations²¹ and more broadly by tailoring work arrangements²² to enable protégés to leverage relationships with personal advisory board members outside the organization.

Some organizations have begun to incorporate education around developmental networks as part of leadership development and talent development initiatives. These efforts help to teach individuals how to proactively design their own developmental networks. At the same time, individuals serving as personal advisory board members begin to recognize that they are not “the mentor” but instead part of a support network for a particular employee — thereby making them feel less burdened or pressured to do more than they can. Once employees establish their personal board of advisors, they don’t need to feel pressure to network constantly; instead, they can be strategic about what kind of support they need and how close and interactive a relationship they desire. Efforts to enhance personal boards of advisors are most sustainable when performance management and succession planning practices recognize and

encourage individuals at all levels to invest in relationship building for the purpose of creating multiple developmental relationships in line with protégé needs.²³

Implications for Individuals

Though an individual’s developmental network may be constrained by organizational contexts and personal relationship competencies, most people still have leeway to initiate and cultivate relationships that fit their needs and priorities. In particular, they can pay attention to the following:

Develop self-awareness. Creating a helpful personal board of advisors depends largely on an individual’s accurate assessment of his or her strengths and weaknesses and career and psychosocial needs and goals, along with a realistic view of how much time and effort he or she can put toward such efforts. This means that individuals should develop strong self-awareness. Self-awareness can be enhanced through self-reflection (for example, through journals, learning logs and after-action reviews),²⁴ relationships with those who can act as sounding boards²⁵ and self-assessment instruments. In addition, numerous assessment tools are available to enhance individuals’ self-awareness.²⁶ What’s more, there are questionnaires designed to help an individual assess the value of his or her personal board of advisors and identify means of improvement.²⁷

Self-awareness is critical to achieving a fit with one’s advisors. On the one hand, it enables individuals to have a better understanding of the types of developmental support they need and the potential advisors they can approach. On the other hand, it can be strengthened through high-quality relationships.²⁸

Broaden membership in your personal board of advisors. Like a diverse portfolio of investments, it is important to have a diversified network with personal advisory board members from multiple sources, since network diversity with both strong and weak ties is instrumental in accessing nonredundant information, is conducive to personal learning and identity development and helps enhance psychological security and self-esteem.²⁹ The six types of personal advisory board members we describe in this article vary in the types and amount of support they typically provide. Individuals can be strategic when configuring their

personal boards of advisors and can leverage their multiple social identities (for example, age, gender, race/ethnicity, nationality), which offer multiple ways to link with other people.³⁰ Having high-quality relationships across differences is important in order to secure a diversity of opinions, information and knowledge that can be sustained over the long run.³¹ In fact, a developmental network composed of “full-service mentors” is not necessarily better than a network that has a variety of advisors in it.³² Building relationships with full-service mentors requires a lot of time and resource commitment. In addition, role conflicts due to different advice and expectations from a variety of full-service mentors can undermine overall network effectiveness.³³ A better approach is to have different types of personal advisory board members from a variety of social realms and with different tie strengths, with an eye toward creating a personal board of advisors that fits your needs.

Allow your network to evolve and change. A developmental network needs to evolve over time as one’s career unfolds and one’s life changes. The fit between the individual and the network is based on two drivers: (1) an accurate assessment of one’s needs and (2) the ability to initiate and cultivate effective relationships with the “right” people based on the time and effort available and the amount and depth of interaction desired. Ongoing assessment and adjustment should take both aspects into account. For example, sometimes it can be more effective for individuals to change their expectations than to attempt to find new personal advisory board members.

Many individuals become too focused on the short term and overlook opportunities for long-term developmental relationships that can provide them with unique perspectives. But by developing self-awareness and periodically reassessing their needs, individuals can find advisors who can help them meet their business and personal goals.

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