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## **ARTICLE** **MANAGING YOURSELF**

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*by Priscilla Claman*

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# Forget Mentors: Employ a Personal Board of Directors

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Like [avocado colored appliances](#), mentoring is something you don't see much anymore. Yes, corporate-sponsored mentorship programs — whether you are the mentor or [the protégé](#) — will always improve personal exposure and connections. But the career strategy of [hitching your future to some rising manager](#) is rapidly becoming outdated.

But hasn't mentoring always been the [time-tested](#) way of getting ahead? Well, today we live in a [different world](#). Middle- and senior-level managers are no longer the ones with stable jobs. With changes in direction, restructuring, downsizing, acquisitions, mergers and, [of course, recessions](#), your mentor is just as likely to move on or be laid off as you are. And if you are considered your mentor's special protégé, you'll most likely lose your job when she does.

**What you need instead is a board of directors for your career, a group of people you consult regularly to get advice and feedback.** There's no need to hold meetings or even inform each person of his or her status as a board member — but you do need to select the right people and stay in touch.

Just like any [good board](#), the people you choose should have different contributions to make to your thinking. You might want to include your boss or a colleague you admire — or both. If you are a senior manager, consider search professionals, academics, or consultants with expertise in your specialty. The people on your board of directors should know more than you about something, be better than you are at something, or offer different points of view. Putting only [buddies on your board](#) won't help you grow and develop.

Putting together your team should be easy. For example, Ted is a financial expert, so I always go to him with financial questions. I call a former colleague of mine, Kerry — who I know has a gift for delivering bad news — when I have something particularly difficult to communicate. Pat, a longtime client of mine, always knows the latest book, the latest theory, and the latest research in my field, so I always ask her about what's new. I may work with some of these folks — or I may not — but I have learned from each of them. They know I think highly of their advice, and I do what I can to help them in return.

**This new substitute for mentoring is also invaluable when making a career transition.** A client of mine — let's call her Ellen — took six years off from a demanding technical career to raise her children. When Ellen was ready to return to work full time, she looked for advice on how to make the transition. She sought out a former work colleague, and he was candid: her technical skills just weren't up-to-date. With his help, Ellen identified the new software she needed to know, and persuaded the software manufacturer to let her into a training class. When she asked for extra help in the class, the instructor found her a software coach to help her get ahead. The coach got her connected with a user group. Then, the user group connected her with a headhunter who told her if she were certified in the software, he could find her a job. While working toward the certification, Ellen regularly stays in touch with her former colleague, the instructor, her software coach, and the headhunter to make sure she is on track.

No single mentor could possibly have made the contribution to Ellen's career that this interconnected team accomplished (almost) together. It required some elbow grease on her part, but it paid off.

Go forth and consult your own network. Instead of relying on a single upper-level manager, assemble a team of equipped specialists for yourself as if you were creating a board of directors — their combined efforts could yield real results for you.

*Priscilla Claman is president of [Career Strategies, Inc.](#), a Boston-based firm offering career coaching to individuals and career management services to organizations. Priscilla is a former corporate Human Resources executive and author of the book, [ASK: How to Get What You Want and Need at Work](#).*

This content was adapted for inclusion in the [HBR Guide to Getting the Mentoring You Need](#).

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