

Help! Save My Career!

by Donald Asher, America's Job Search Guru

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Dear Guru Don:

Help! My boss wants to give me a challenging new assignment, but no more money! I am so upset I don't know what to do. I work for a founder-managed startup. We just brought a major investor on board, and for the first time we have cash out the wazoo. However, I apparently don't warrant a share of the largesse. It's pretty complicated, but I thought I was going to be named CFO, and now he gave me this weird new assignment, Director of External Synergies. My boss wants me to identify other companies for either acquisition or joint ventures or intellectual property licensure or even eventually to acquire us. We are a "hot" company, which means we could either go IPO, sell, or crash and burn, all within the next 18 to 36 months, by my estimation. Sure, I'd like to be around for the upside, but I don't want to be taken advantage of. And I definitely don't want to work 60 to 70+ hours a week for the high privilege of sitting in a better chair on the deck of the Titanic. I am a veteran player in Silicon Valley, and I have seen all this before. Big promises, stock instead of pay, stupid short-term decisions based on unrealistic long-term expectations. Then the ship sinks and we get buttkiss nada. So I'm a little gun shy. But I will admit this is the best shot I've ever had, both in terms of my job and in terms of the potential of the opportunity. But I don't want to be the fool chasing the end of the rainbow. I'd love to just go for it one more time, but I'm having trouble with the "just believe" part. I don't want to strike out all over again. Also, when is it appropriate to overlook the owner of the company putting his girlfriend on the payroll, when she doesn't appear to be doing any work?

Sign me,

Been There and Done That

Dear Been There:

Wow! That's a lot of metaphors, my Been There friend. You have the Titanic and a rainbow, stepping up and striking out, and gun-shy crashing and burning. I'm not surprised you don't want to "take one for the team." You need to go into business speak rehab, Mr. Done That, and reconnect with simple, declarative sentences. Then maybe I could help you. And according to my dictionary of slang, it's bupkiss, not buttkiss, although I do like your coinage better. If you ever get tired of trying to get rich gambling in Santa Clara County, there's a future for you in the new word business.

Okay, enough verbal abuse. What about your problem? There are two issues in play here: fairness and your career advancement. First, let's take apart the fairness issue. Humans are hardwired to care about fairness, and if you are being treated unfairly you are not going to be motivated, you won't excel, and thus you won't advance in your career. So fairness matters. In fact, psychologists have repeatedly shown that humans would rather

have nothing at all rather than to get an unfairly small portion of rewards. So, is the CEO treating you differently from the others on the executive team? Are you the only one asked to take on more responsibilities without any more cash now? If so, you definitely should push for a raise with the new assignment.

To ask for a raise, you need to establish what the true market value is for the work you are being asked to perform. What would it cost the company to hire someone else to do the job you're going to do? To find this out, you have to be part scientist, and part seer.

The scientist would identify the professional association associated with the job, and discover if they do an annual salary survey (they almost all do). She'd also go to these two portal web sites and try to establish national norms: jobstar.org/tools/salary and salary.com. This will give you some raw data, most of it inaccurate.

The seer would then try to adjust the data to your particular case. Director of External Synergies is a weird title, so compare yourself to officer-level people involved in business development, strategy, or M&A. To further complicate the matter, smaller companies, startups, and rapidly evolving business sectors are notoriously variable when it comes to compensation, so this is not going to be easy. The whole salary thing is coming up in a later column, but you get the idea.

Then you approach the CEO and present a *business rationale* for why you think the new assignment should come through with a raise attached.

On the other hand, regardless of your compensation for this assignment you have an entirely different calculus to consider: Is this a career-enhancing assignment for you? Even if the company tanks, are you going to come out of this positioned to do better than ever?

If yes, you may need to swallow the red pill and see beyond the apparent. Career advancement comes from two things: skills and experience. You obviously have the skills, but you may need the experience to get to the next level. Once you have experience as an officer-level strategist, it may not matter whether your company crashes or goes IPO. You will be a winner either way.

You have to see past the event in front of you. Forget your *immediate* payoff, good or bad. You need to be looking two moves ahead, or more. To paraphrase Alonzo Harris in *Training Day*, are you playing chess or are you playing checkers? Plodders play checkers, and you don't want to be a plodder. You might hate your boss's parsimony, but if this experience increases your market value, go for it!

Besides, promotions often are imperfect. You may have to do two jobs for awhile, or take a gig with low pay or a bad title. A promotion is a stepping stone, not a destination. If it's a great stepping stone, it's a great move. Unless you suddenly go brain dead, you won't be stuck with that situation for long. And as you admit, in three years, max, this is resolved one way or another.

As to the girlfriend on the payroll, this is a reason to be glad you weren't named CFO. If you'd have gotten *that* assignment, you'd be in an ethical dilemma with the CEO. Consider yourself lucky to be out of the line of fire, if you don't mind my dragging out yet another tired old business metaphor. A smart external synergies officer focuses on the external. Besides, maybe they talk three hours every night about the company, which ought to be worth something. In any case, it's not your business, for now.

My best wishes for your continued success,

Donald Asher

Send your career emergency to don@donaldasher.com, and watch this space for Asher's response.

BIO: Donald Asher is a nationally known writer and speaker on careers and higher education. He is the author of eleven books, including *Cracking the Hidden Job Market*; *How to Get Any Job: Life Launch and Re-Launch for Everyone Under 30*; *Graduate Admissions Essays*, the best-selling guide to the graduate admissions process; *Asher's Bible of Executive Resumes*; *Cool Colleges for the Hyper-Intelligent, Self-Directed, Late Blooming, and Just Plain Different*; and *Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why* (named Business Book of the Year 2008 by national career columnist Joyce Lain Kennedy). Asher speaks over 100 days a year from coast to coast, to college and corporate audiences. He is eager to hear your career emergency.

Career Tip of the Month: Skillsets don't separate winners from losers, strategies do. When facing career decisions, focus on building advantage two and three steps into the future. Taking one step back to leap two steps forward often beats plodding ahead one step at a time.