

THE CAREER OF NETTIE SEABROOKS AND INFLUENCE AGAINST ALL ODDS

To begin the deeper exploration of how to acquire influence, we want you to meet Nettie Seabrooks. She is a real person and that is her actual name. All that follows actually occurred—nothing is made up. Not only is this a fascinating story in its own right, but it is useful in extending many of the issues of the influence model. And given the barriers to her acquiring influence at GM, her story is inspirational. If she could do it, so can you!

We first met Nettie in her current role, at age 70, as Chief Operating Officer of the Detroit Institute of the Arts, a major museum. A petite, almost frail-looking African American woman, she is friendly and insatiably curious, interested in people and ideas. She proved to be remarkably tough and able, despite having only recently come to the museum world. After a long, successful career at General Motors, Nettie had agreed to help run the campaign for mayor of her friend, Daniel Archer, and ended up first as Deputy Mayor of Detroit, as well as his Chief of Staff, then as Chief Operating Officer of the city. Now she has a new career in museum administration. So how did this happen?

Nettie's first job at General Motors was as a librarian in the Public Relations library in 1962. This was a bigger deal than it sounds. This was before the Civil Rights Movement had gained much force, before Affirmative Action, before many African Americans had white collar jobs, before laws against sexual harassment and discrimination against women, in a conservative bastion of white males where Nettie was without connections. Let's listen to how she discusses her career in our interviews with her, both for what happened, and to hear the attitudes and feelings that she brought to her experiences. Here is her story as she tells it:

In the 1950s it was not easy for a Black woman to get any sort of technical or professional job. I graduated from Marygrove College in 1955 with a degree in Chemistry, but there was no chemical or pharmaceutical company that would take me. My college dean said, "Nettie, if you get a Masters in Library Sciences in Chemistry, you can get a job because there is so much need there, they won't worry about your race."

I went to the University of Michigan for two years and got that degree. I was then able to find employment in the Technology Department of the Detroit Public Library, and worked there for two years. I married in August of 1958 and we moved to Nashville for four years where I taught in a university while my husband was going to medical school.

We came back to Detroit in June of 1962. I had a daughter who was two years old and I was pregnant and gave birth to my son that August. My husband was doing his Residency and earning only \$3,000 a year. That was not enough money for us to live on so I still needed to work. I heard that there was a job opening at General Motors in the Public Relations Staff Library at Corporate headquarters.

This would have been a big deal for me. Good pay and benefits in a prestigious organization. There was only one problem: Headquarters was really lily White. Of the over 4,000 employees in that building, there was only one other Black person (who had been hired because GM had been pressured by the Urban League). There were no Black elevator operators, no Blacks in the janitorial or maintenance operation, and no Blacks washing dishes in the cafeteria. Now, that's lily White!

Furthermore, if you were a woman, you had to take a typing test. Even though I had a master's degree, taught in a university, and had a successful work history as a librarian, I had to take that test. I took it, passed, and was hired into the library just two months after having given birth.

SEXUAL HARASSMENT ON THE JOB

My security was short lived because an incident occurred that I feared would cost me my job. I had been working for only three months when I came back from lunch one day to find a phone message on my desk. It was from the Assistant Personnel Director. I called, and he said, "Nettie, please come down to the storeroom." As I opened the door, he grabbed me. He had been drinking and said, "just one kiss." I broke away from him, ran out of the room, and went up to the library.

I was scared and felt helpless. I had only been there a few months, I didn't know anybody, and if I complained, it would be my word against his. I couldn't tell my husband because he would have forced me to quit. I was making twice what he was and we needed that money. So I didn't say anything. I lived with that fear for the next three months until my probationary period was over. Since the Assistant Personnel Manager's office was just down the hall, we bumped into each other regularly, but we both pretended that this incident never occurred.

HOW NETTIE DEFINED HER ROLE

I did reference research work for the next five years. I loved what I was doing because of the caliber of people and the challenge of the work. It was not just a matter of pulling a book off the shelf, but solving the problems that people came in with. We were the central source of information for headquarters so any time anybody from labor relations, finance, or the central office staff needed something, they came to us.

Other librarians saw themselves "as librarians who happened to be working in GM," but I saw myself "as working for GM and happened to be assigned in the library." So I tried to keep the larger organization in mind. Also, I always tried to go the extra step and give people information I thought they needed rather than just waiting for them to ask. I expect to work hard and to think. I was raised with the notion that "I should do whatever I can to help others."

I knew that as a Black woman, I stuck out like a sore thumb—and I wanted to really deliver. When I am hired, I don't say, "What's my job; what does my boss want me to do

and tell me to do?” Instead, my orientation is “What needs to be done?” And I don’t ever say to myself, “but that’s not my job.”

When managers find a resource, they keep on coming back. So when people came in or called, they would often ask for me specifically. I never felt resentment at others who didn’t take as much of the initiative. I just felt that was what I should do. I didn’t compare myself to others; that was just my work ethic. I believe that you have to take pride in everything that you do—and no work is beneath you. If you do that, you won’t find yourself being bored because you are always trying to learn, always trying to do it better. I only knew one way to do the work.

GETTING NOTICED

I got a big break in 1965. Ralph Nader had just written *Unsafe at any Speed* attacking the Chevrolet Corvair for apparent safety defects. GM had hired private investigators to investigate Nader and this got into the press so the organization was in even deeper trouble with the public and with Washington. Senator Abe Ribicoff was Chairman of the Governmental Affairs Committee and looking into the federal role in traffic safety. He called on GM to testify and Richard Gerstenberg, Executive VP for all the Finance Areas, was to go.

GM didn’t have a sophisticated Washington staff to do the background research and to coach Gerstenberg, so that task fell to our area. His preparation team was comprised mainly of executives, and they would ask all sorts of questions. All librarians helped, but I really worked hard to find additional information that I thought might be of assistance.

The last big push before Gerstenberg went to DC was a “preparing the witness” session where the team would think of all the questions he was likely to be asked. Because I had been so involved in the research, they asked me to help prepare questions. Now the others were unclassified [high in the GM ranks] executives or maybe a couple of Level 8 writers (I was only at Level 5) so this was the first “out-of-librarian” request that had been made of me. I was now really part of the team. It turned out that my questions were among the toughest ones that had been written. They were impressed and this was what really started my involvement on a different level than just normal routine library stuff.

Gerstenberg’s testimony was very successful and was key to propelling him to be later named Chairman of GM. He became a hero because of that performance.

PROMOTION TO MANAGER OF THE LIBRARY, BUT AN ISSUE OF PAY GRADE

In 1967, my boss, the manager of the Library, committed suicide. Even though the two other (White) librarians had been there a long time, the Director of Editorial Services (that the Library reported to) called me in and discussed my becoming the manager. “We have a question about how long you will stay at GM,” he asked. I looked him dead in the eye and said, “the length of my stay in GM will depend entirely on GM.” He had no answer to

that so I got the job. I was promoted from Level 5 to Level 6 even though the previous manager had been unclassified at the Executive level. That was okay with me. Some people said, "That's not right." I knew that I could make an issue of this, but would I win the battle and lose the war? I thought that I would bide my time and just work hard at my new job.

In 1972, Dick Gerstenberg became Chairman of GM. I had continued to do research for him since the Washington hearings, but I didn't have any special relationship with him—no more than with other executives around headquarters. GM held its monthly Board Meetings in New York. Apparently on one of the flights there in the company jet, Dick inquired about me. "How is she classified?" When he learned that I was still Level 6, Dick hit the roof and said, "I want to make her unclassified—that's wrong, just fix it." I was made Level 7 for 6 months, Level 8 for 6 months, and then I was unclassified. So I felt my patience won out.

BUILDING FROM THE FORMAL MANAGERIAL POSITION

During the years that I headed the library, I did many things. We introduced computers, and I worked to build a culture of "not just responding to requests" but seeing where we could take initiative. I also tried to cut out unnecessary work. It had been the practice for the librarians to read all the major newspapers and clip and send out articles that they thought might interest the various areas. Copying and distributing the articles took a lot of time and I wondered if anybody was reading them. So at our next staff meeting I said, "Starting tomorrow, we are going to try something new. We are only going to 'read and file' but not send out. And we will see how others respond. And we aren't going to send out an inquiry—let's see what the reaction is." Only one person, two months later, asked if we were still sending clippings out and when I explained that we were not, but that they were available, he was satisfied. So we just sent out a letter explaining that we have files and they are all available.

In all that we did, I made sure that we always stayed within our budget. That built up trust with those above me. So when they gave me a third more space to expand our operations, my boss said, "just put together a budget for renovation and we will approve it; you don't have to make a case for the expenditures."

RISKING HER JOB; STANDING UP TO A DIRECTOR

Not everything was always rosy. There was the incident with one of the Directors, Waldo McNaught, that nearly cost me my job. He was very tough and was seen as the first among equals among the Directors.

Associated with the Annual Stockholder's meeting would be a dinner for the officers. As part of Public Relations, we were involved in helping with all the preparations. On the following Monday, Waldo called me into his office. I'll never forget it. He was standing

by the window and turned to me, furious. At the dinner, the wife's nametag of one of the directors was wrong—it was the name of his previous wife! Those writing the nametags had called the library and the librarian had checked the *Who's Who*, but it wasn't up to date.

Waldo bellowed at me, "I want to know who did that and send her down to me!" Now, I knew who had done it. It was an honest mistake and I knew that he would devastate her. I looked at him and said, "No, Waldo, I will not. You have told me what happened and I know what I have to do." He glared at me and shouted, "SEND HER DOWN HERE" and I said, "No, I will not" and walked out. I knew that my job could go down the drain, but I was sure that he would act in a totally inappropriate way if I sent the assistant.

Then I went back to the library and called everybody together and explained what had happened. I didn't single her out, but we changed the process. If it had been shoddy work, I would have handled it differently, but I couldn't let him bully her.

After that, Waldo treated me differently. I think it was because I wasn't afraid of him that he respected me more. Waldo and I had a great relationship, he really liked me, even invited me to his home. I think he might have been proud to have me as part of his staff. We got on great.

But that incident was a defining moment for me. I realized that I was responsible for a group of people and that I had to stand up for them. That was also big internally because I had put myself on the line for her. You can't fight every battle, but when you decide to go to the mat, you have to be willing to take the consequences.

LIFE LESSON

I think I learned this from my father. During the 1940s, he was maintenance manager at Chrysler and his boss was continuously mean to him. I think he was a racist and resented having a Black man work for him. But my father just took it and did his job. So many times I have said to myself, "If Daddy could take it from Mr. Malone, I can handle this situation." It has gotten me through many tough times.

This didn't mean I accepted abuse that I shouldn't have. We often had problems with the staff from Finance. They were voracious users of library services. Many were Harvard MBAs who saw themselves as the real hotshots from the New York office. They could be obnoxious, especially "John," one of the nastiest guys that I ever have met. He would come in and demand immediate attention even if I was doing a task for another executive. Now, the finance folks were the power in the corporation, but I wouldn't put others aside to respond to him. Finally I got fed up and I went to his director and said, "you have to take care of John; I am not working for him and I am doing the best job I can." That worked because from then on John {and the others} acted more civilized to me and my staff.

EXPANDING TO ACCOMMODATE OVERSEAS OPERATIONS

Whenever I saw the opportunity to offer more or better service, I went for it. In the late 1970s, the decision was made to move the entire corporate overseas operations from New York to Detroit. But they weren't going to move the overseas library. I thought that was a stupid decision because it seemed to me that it would cripple their effectiveness. It didn't make any sense to me at all. At first I thought that I would check with my boss, Tony DeLorenzo, and ask him whether I should expand our library. But I was afraid that he would worry about the budget and say "no."

Marina Whitman was the Group VP in charge of overseas operations so I called her. "Since you are not bringing the overseas library to Detroit, I believe that I can expand our operations to accommodate the 200-300 people from your staff who are coming. What do you think of that?" She told me to come to New York, and there she told me this is something I should do. I didn't want to rub Tony's face in it so I didn't say anything to him. I just expanded my library, stayed within my budget, so when the overseas operation came to Detroit, I was ready.

I didn't see this as really being devious. I saw this as an opportunity to provide a service needed by the corporation. I didn't incur any additional expenditures and I delivered on my other responsibilities. That taught me that sometimes it is better to ask for forgiveness afterwards rather than permission ahead of time.

WRITING FOR GM MAGAZINE

I knew the editor of the *GM Magazine* and knew that he often had difficulty getting enough interesting articles, so I would give him ideas for subject matter and offer to have the library assist with background research. From those conversations, he asked if I would like to write an article, so I ended up doing two or three a year. It would have been presumptuous of me to initially offer, but I put myself in a position where it just evolved naturally. Yes, the articles took more of my time, including free time, but one of the consequences is that it gave me an opportunity to stretch and it did give me more publicity. But I didn't do it for that reason, I just liked the idea of doing the research. I never used one of the topics to advance anything that I was personally interested in.

In the actions I took, I got a reputation of delivering so I was known by all the top people in GM. I didn't set out to do it for personal glory. That would have been self-defeating because they would have smelled it. I was just doing my job. I wanted to make a contribution to GM, to be part of the fabric and not just an appendage. I never went to somebody and said, "this might help you"—this would be presumptuous (unless it was an extension of an existing project). But I tried to figure out what others needed and just gave it to them.

ANTICIPATING COMPETITIVE INFORMATION NEEDS

An example of this was with the strategic planning process. Up to the late 1970s, GM had seen Ford and Chrysler as their competitors. But with Japanese autos coming in and the oil embargo, there was a sea-change in what we had to watch out for. We were finding that the people from the different car divisions were coming to us and asking different sorts of questions than they had in the past. They were doing competitive analyses and finding that their competition was all over the world so they were using our international resources. They were mentioning companies that we had never heard about. I said, "I need to look into this." I went to Northwestern and took a one-week course on competitive analysis. Then I went to my boss and built an argument about why this was important. I got a book by Michael Kaiser on competitive analysis and I had a question, so I called him. He got intrigued with the work we were doing.

I thought that competitive analysis and strategic planning had to be done in stages. It seemed to me that before managers sent their people out in the field, those individuals had to be prepared. Now we didn't lecture the managers on this. All we did was find out who was going out and we developed the background material that they would need to be ready. And it was like a snowball; the more we did, the more they depended on it. And when they came, we guided them through the process.

I had never heard the word "benchmarking" but I wanted to make sure that my operation was doing everything that it could do to help the corporation. So I identified the other key organizations that were like ours and went around the country to SRI, IBM, McGraw-Hill, Standard Oil, and a few others to visit their library operations and see what they were doing. What I mostly learned was what not to do. The major problem with several of them was seeing themselves as separate libraries rather than as fully integrated into the organization. I didn't want our library to work in such isolation.

RESISTING ASSIGNMENT TO A NEW BOSS

I never wanted to do anything that would be seen as devious, political, or self-serving, but I was faced with a problem in 1984. It was the day before Thanksgiving, and my boss, Jack McNulty called me in and said that they were reorganizing the entire Public Relations area (because one of the directors was leaving). "From now on, Nettie, you are going to be working for the Director of Personnel." I knew this person wasn't competent (and an alcoholic to boot). I said, "Jack, this is going to be bad for my staff, bad for the operations because Fred is just Fred." Jack said, "That's the way it's going to be." I went back to my office devastated. I let myself feel terrible for about an hour and then I said to myself "Nettie, either you are going to feel sorry for yourself or you are going to do something."

There were three people whom logically I could call. Mark Hogan, whom I had known when he was head of the Treasurer's Office but was now out in operations, Bob O'Connell, who was now VP of Finance, or Roger Smith, who was Chairman of the Board (whom I had begun doing some work for when he was Executive Vice-President. I even had researched protocol for him later as Chairman when he and his wife had to go to

Washington for a State Dinner at the White House and then a formal dinner at the British Embassy with Margaret Thatcher).

I decided not to bother Roger. Instead, I called a friend of mine who was working for Mark. He said, “you have to call Mark right away.” I did that and he said, “Nettie, that’s not going to happen.” I said, “I just wanted you to know.” I thought that if he thought it was important enough, he would do something; if it wasn’t important and he wouldn’t do anything. And I could live with that.

The Monday after Thanksgiving, I got called to the office of the Group VP, Elmer Johnson, who Jack reported to. He said,

Nettie, I’ve been thinking, there’s your operation and there’s the Government Operation [they had their own library] and I think there is a better way of running those operations. How do you think they could be operated more effectively?

Actually, I had never considered that but I thought quickly,

Well, Elmer, they are both on the 11th floor. One is a business unit [non-technical] and the other is geared toward government research. I know there are duplications and I also think they could be managed better.

“Nettie, I want you to write me a private memo giving me a recommendation on how these two operations could be managed more effectively.”

“Okay, Elmer,” I replied and went back to my office knowing that I was in a big crack. I knew that when he said “private memo” it meant no cc’s. I had either to do what Elmer wanted me to do and make an enemy of Jack or not do what he requested (and tell Jack) and thereby make an enemy of Elmer. It seemed to me that I had no choice—especially if I took account of what was best for the library and for GM.

But this also seemed to be an opportunity to identify what the expanded function had become. I laid out the combined organization structure and titled it “Public Affairs Information Services,” removing all reference to library and putting it under one director. I thought this is my one opportunity—if you are ever to be made director, suggest it here. For me it was a huge leap. I had to put director in.

The following Monday the Board was meeting in New York. All officers went to the Board meeting. At 10 a.m., I got a phone call from Jack. He was furious because Elmer had given him the memo. Jack said, “Why did you do this?” I replied “Elmer called me to the office and I did exactly what he said.” I didn’t apologize; I just gave him the facts.

That didn’t placate Jack, and in December, he tried to hang on me anything that went wrong in Public Relations. But that didn’t work. It was the day before Christmas and Elmer promoted me to be the director of the new Public Affairs Information Service,

which meant that I and all my staff were pulled out from under Jack and put under Government Relations. Jack was furious and tried to block the decision, but couldn't. I combined the two departments, cut out duplication, and more than doubled the size. In the 22 years that I had been with General Motors, I had risen from Assistant Librarian at Level 5 to a director, and had totally redefined the function of the library system. It had been very hard work, but very satisfying.

A BIG PROMOTION TO OPERATIONS

After 10 months, I was asked if I would like to go out on the operations side as Director of Government and Civic Affairs for the Chevrolet, Pontiac and GM of Canada Group. This was monumental, a profound career change within GM. I had to leave the GM building which was the finance center where I had been working, to go to work for a car company. I'd never even been inside a passenger car plant. I knew everyone in the GM building who counted and they knew me. But I jumped at the chance. It was scary, but a huge opportunity to do things I wanted to do. And I felt I could do it. Also, it was time to get out of the same operation where I had been for 23 years. I wanted a more important role at GM.

Public affairs work turned out to be stimulating and challenging. I was now dealing with crusty plant managers and unions, at a time when GM was struggling to reconcile its international operations and their differing demands for local sourcing in the light of the NAFTA agreements. One set of activities had to do with the community responses to closing plants, never an easy task.

I spent a lot of time closing seven plants—Norwood, Tarrytown, etc. Each had up to 3,000 workers; that's significant. Mayors and other politicians were involved, in some of the biggest media centers in the United States. My first was the Fiero plant in Pontiac Michigan, which was a very popular plant. The VP of CPC manufacturing, Dave Campbell, was a really tough guy. Soon the mayor of Pontiac called and wanted to meet with Dave. The mayor knew he couldn't undo the closing, but he wanted a face-saving meeting for his constituents. I barely knew Dave yet, but I told him that Mayor Moore wanted to meet with him. Dave declared, "I'm not going to meet him, it's a waste of time." I thought, I'm not going to stay and argue with him because he's just going to stand and holler. It was clear to me that he had made up his mind and it would have been a waste of time to argue with him. I said, "Dave, you're either going to meet with the mayor or you'll end up meeting with Jesse Jackson; you decide," and walked out. I knew the closing made a big story, and that the mayor could have easily called Jesse Jackson and he'd immediately come. Later that day, Dave's secretary called and said he'd like to meet with the mayor! I set it up, they had an innocuous breakfast, and we never heard another word. Dave and I got along great after that.

BRIDGING HEADQUARTERS AND THE FIELD

When I first went out to CPC, Corporate Industry Government Relations (IGR) wouldn't let me go, so I was matrixed out to CPC. CPC was wild and crazy, with plants all over, and I approached the job differently from my counterparts. I didn't want to be identified with the head office, which would have been a problem. It got clear to me that to the guys out in the field, if I was just a representative of central office, I would never gain their trust and respect. I had to be one of them.

After I had been there a while, when it came time to assign a project to one plant or another, (billion dollar decisions), they didn't want IGR influencing them. IGR people were always trying to find out what going on. On one huge project, they were going round and round. Even though my salary and bonus were determined by IGR, I told them, "Look, the only way I'm going to keep the trust of these people out here is to keep it; I can't be telling you all that's going on before its time. You have to trust I'm looking out for your interests." That was tough, tough, tough for them to swallow. I was only a conduit, and they had to trust I'd get them info they couldn't get otherwise, and it was a real tightrope. But I was able to make it work.

Being a woman executive in a man's world, there were certain things I knew I couldn't do. For example, if a man bangs his fist on the table, people listen. If a woman does it, they say she's having PMS, her period, is out of control, a bitch. I understood early on that I had to be firm and make my point, but in a way that this black woman would be respected, treated appropriately, and not be taken lightly. At GM, you had to keep your own persona and build trust and respect, which was needed to succeed. You may not respect the individuals, but that's the deck you are handed.

Nettie built trust and respect out of the cards she was dealt and successfully worked in Public Affairs for eight years before being asked by Dennis Archer, who was running for Mayor of Detroit, to be part of his campaign. After he was elected, she left GM reluctantly, and with considerable fanfare from the company.

Nettie's rise to a position of great influence from humble beginnings contains numerous elements worth noting. We do not claim that doing everything as she did is the perfect recipe for gaining influence, but it certainly contains a large measure of the important ingredients. There are an interrelated set of lessons we can learn from her experiences, which feed one another. These include doing good work; placing the organization's interests above her own; making valuable exchanges; building many relationships; and avoiding self-limiting traps.

GOOD WORK MATTERS

First and foremost, what really matters in being influential is that you produce. Note the amount of energy Nettie put into doing high-quality work that helps others and helps the organization. In her librarian role, she plunged into finding valuable information, anticipating what might be helpful to executives who used the library. She doesn't treat

her work as just a job, but seeks better ways to deliver. She did that for years as a librarian, and when she got more responsibility, she looked for ways to deliver extra value—helping the international people, combining two libraries, staying within budget, cutting costs, and so on.

Notice that Nettie got ahead without focusing on her own personal advancement (except for the one time when she wanted to be a director, and even then the primary driver was the belief that an impending reorganization would be a disaster for her unit). She did more than was expected, focused on what was good for the company, and was eventually recognized. It might be difficult today, or even counterproductive, to be as patient as she was, or, to keep quiet about being sexually harassed, as she had to early in her career. But in the conditions at those times, with no sexual harassment laws and being a person of color, staying quiet and going about her business was an understandable self-protection reaction. She went back to work and focused on performing. Not everyone can risk everything to blow the whistle on improper behavior, though we are grateful to those who pave the way for others at great personal risk. Ironically, keeping quiet may even have created some obligation in the supervisor who harassed her. It's possible that he felt grateful for not being turned in, since he never again mentioned the incident, and her decision not to embarrass him may have helped her receive latitude. However, giving her credit for her ability to overlook a grievous offense does not diminish the personal costs to Nettie for keeping quiet. But her definition of the situation let her tolerate the costs.

Gaining influence can require great skill and courage, but it seldom derives from clever tactics alone. Competent job performance is one price of admission, though by itself it may be insufficient. Hard work and good job performance don't guarantee influence, but their lack usually guarantees an inability to get what you want or need.

PLACING THE ORGANIZATION'S INTERESTS FIRST

Too many people think about their careers in terms of having to make tradeoffs between responding to their own self-interests vs. the interests of the organization. Framing choices this way can lead to false dichotomies and poor choices. Although it is necessary to think about one's own interests; it would be folly (and perhaps impossible) not to. The problem is that thinking primarily about self interests and only in the short term usually leads others to be mistrustful—which works against self interests! When Nettie was first made head librarian, she spent five years being in a lower pay level than she deserved. Instead of being resentful, she focused on activities and behavior that increased her value to the organization, in effect *investing* in her long-term interests. When she had built up sufficient reputation capital, she was able to push her aspirations—creating a proposal that would also enable her to become a Director—but even then, she did it in a context that would improve the organization's efficiency.

This is not to suggest that “everything comes to he (or she) who waits,” that there is always justice in the organizational world, and that patience is its own reward. There are many things you can do to help advance your interests—the subject of *Influence without*

Authority—but being over-focused on yourself is counterproductive. In Nettie’s case, her early career was in an era when white men were not experienced in dealing with professional women or minorities, and even the appearance of being personally demanding would probably have been seen as “too pushy.” Although she may not have thought of it this way, she sensed that she had to bide her time. But instead of plotting and fuming, she made herself more and more competent and valuable by digging in to producing good results and learning.

Some women (and men) can sometimes assume that merely keeping their noses to the grindstone and doing good work will result in raises, recognition and promotion, which can prevent them from appropriately working the organizational network and politics, but in Nettie’s case, she was getting visibility as a natural part of her research for top executives. She was not only doing good work, but looking for extra things she could do to be helpful to the company—and in that process became widely known and valued. By the time she left corporate, she knew “everybody who mattered.” Thus, her limited options for self-promotion, caused by her precarious double minority status and a nonmainstream job, did not harm her prospects in the long run, though it took a long time for payoff.

Nettie loved working at GM. She went the extra step without feeling resentment. She “wanted to make a contribution to GM, be part of the fabric and not just an appendage.” As a result she could take initiative without trying to feather her own nest, or feeling resentment that she was working harder than other librarians. And all of this inspires trust. For many years, each time she took action, she was thinking about what was good for the company, and not just jockeying for position or glory. Those eventually followed, but were not the focus. When she helped executives, it was because she saw it as helping GM; when she suggested that the international library be consolidated at headquarters, it was not a power play, even though it ended up increasing her power. The only time that Nettie directly asked for something for herself was when she requested that she not have to report to someone she saw as incompetent. Even in that case, her ability to deliver for others would have been harmed, so there was an organizational as well as personal payoff. And by then, her reputation as a loyal member of the GM team gave her some latitude to have a personal request.

In several dramatic instances, Nettie made choices that a more immediately self-interested person wouldn’t. One was when she stood up to a powerful executive about meeting the mayor of Pontiac. She also stood up to a powerful director when he wanted to scapegoat one of her subordinates. Another was when she helped Gerstenberg deal with Ralph Nader. Nettie thought GM was wrong to hire a private detective to get the dirt on Nader, but she didn’t question GM’s policies in relation to the safety of the cars he attacked. She doesn’t dissociate herself from the company; she believed in it, so the issue doesn’t even arise for her. There was a potential for the company to be embarrassed by the hearings, so she pitched in with extra vigor, and helped Gerstenberg prepare. It comes naturally for her to put the company’s interests first. (Of course, if you are asked to support a policy or action that violates your own standards in relation to environment, accounting, safety, equal treatment, or any other value, you have to decide for yourself if the principle is more

important than protecting yourself, and act accordingly. In that instance, you may believe that society's interests are even more important than the company's or your career).

RELATIONSHIPS MATTER

There are several aspects of relationships that make them important: First, they give you visibility and access. Second, they help you know what is important. Third, they provide people to call on when help is needed. For example, Nettie didn't have to call in the chips with Gerstenberg since he knew her. She utilized her reputation when contacted by Elmer Johnson to make a big request. When she phoned Marina Whitman, she was a known person making a proposal in Whitman's interests.

As can be seen from the many times that senior executives came to her rescue, being connected and having good relationships made a difference in Nettie being able to get things done (and to advance in GM). The old adage, "It isn't what you know but who you know" is partly right. It *does* matter what you know, but that doesn't count for much if no one knows what you know. Organizations are networks of people, not all aware of all other members. Thus, who you know and who knows you makes good work visible. Further, the more people who know and like or respect you, the greater the chance that when you need something, you will be starting with an advantage. Nettie developed a wide number of relationships, partly by having a role that put her in contact with many executives despite it being much lower in the organization's hierarchy and partly by performing it so well. Also, her disadvantages, being Black and female, probably made her more visible—a curse if one isn't very competent, but a potential blessing if one is—and helped her make connections. Being pleasant, sincere, and loyal, with real focus on the work, also made her more likeable. All of these together gave her a wide net of connections that knew her and her good work, and that she could tap when she needed something. The people who have the most informal influence in organizations also have the greatest number of good relationships.

INFLUENCE AS EXCHANGE

Relationships alone are not enough; those who know someone have to feel that there is a benefit of some kind to them if they are going to be cooperative or helpful. As we have emphasized, influence is about exchange and reciprocity; people allow themselves to be influenced if they see that they are getting something they value. All influence is created by the willingness of those who get what is valuable to them to give what is desired.

All those times that Nettie anticipated needs and provided useful information or ideas for GM executives, resulted in their willingness to help her, sometimes without her asking, and at other times in response to her direct requests. She not only worked hard, but by her position she could find a valuable commodity—information—and create appreciation. Because she often anticipated what executives might find useful to know about something they were working on and sent it to them without being asked, she was seen as going beyond the job. She wasn't focused on getting something back (except perhaps self-esteem in fulfilling her self-concept as being conscientious, dedicated, helpful, and

thoughtful), but we can see that she induced others to want to help her when they knew what she wanted or needed. Insofar as her work was above and beyond expectations, she came to be seen as valuable. For example, when she developed tough preparation questions for Gerstenberg's appearance before a congressional committee, the task force was impressed and brought her into the process, and later, when he was in a senior position, Gerstenberg felt appreciative enough to fix her below-position pay when he learned of it. Think about this the next time you are tempted to say you are too busy when offered a chance to serve on a task force.

Reciprocity does not have to be immediate, and appreciation for being given something valuable can last a long time without being called on; Nettie never asked Gerstenberg to fix her rank, but his appreciation for her caused him to take that step. It may take too long to suit some people's tastes, but in organizational life, generosity works—sooner or later. For Nettie, this happened many times. She offered ideas to the editor of the GM magazine, and eventually was asked to write for it, which didn't hurt her reputation or visibility even if she was not thinking about that. She made a number of bosses look good by staying within budget while expanding services; as a result, when she did need to expand the space she didn't have to go through the usual justification process. She was already trusted. She provided Elmer Johnson with savings by combining two libraries and in turn got the director's position. She protected a subordinate from a powerful director and not only won gratitude and hard work from subordinates but apparently grudging respect from the director. She even pushed back to the powerful Dave Campbell, and to her headquarters parent organization, showing each how not listening to her would have negative consequences they cared about. Because of this, she won respect and autonomy. In all these cases, Nettie was creating payoffs that people cared about and, in turn, she got back things she valued.

The complex economy of how to figure out what is considered valuable by others, how to determine equivalent value, how to make exchanges that yield good results for the influencer and the influenced, are all at the heart of the *Influence without Authority* book, but in simple understandable form, Nettie's experiences provide a good, proven example.

AVOID SELF-INFLICTED TRAPS

As we have stated, since everyone already influences many times a day, there is a lot of knowledge about how to do it. Yet the frustration and puzzlement of how to gain cooperation from others in the organization who cannot be controlled has grown greater. While it is true that organizations have become more complex and egalitarian, so that there are fewer people given the power to order others around, part of the problem is that there are many situations that trigger behavior that gets in the way. Job assignments that are insufficiently challenging or prestigious enough—or laden with meetings and opponents—cause whining or disaffection, missing opportunities to learn and make supportive relationships. People who at first don't get the help they want start to treat the ones whose help they need as defective in some way and alienate the influence target more. They make offers that are more appealing to the influencer than the person to whom they are

being offered. They negotiate trades in a way that diminishes the relationship and reduces willingness to trade. They become so locked into their own views of what is right that they don't respond well to new information from the one they want to influence. Or they wheel and deal in a way that creates mistrust of their motives.

It is impressive that Nettie seldom fell into these traps. She did not write off those who are difficult. She instinctively anticipated what other people are likely to want, and provided it, without attaching strings. (The strings created—a feeling of wanting to be good to her—were voluntary and due to gratitude, not to her demands). She saw the opportunities for learning and contributing in every job, building her knowledge and reputation as she went along. She delivered great value, as when she offered Marina Whitman a choice about combining her library with international material, and even when she responded with an organizational form that benefited her, it was first and foremost a benefit to Marina and her organization. Nettie wasted no time scheming how to get influence, and never got a reputation for being more interested in her own career than in helping others, so she did not create enemies who wanted to see her fail.

CONCLUSION

Nettie isn't perfect, and some of what she did might be impossible for ambitious, values-driven people who cannot so deeply love their companies, but she provides good lessons about influence that can help you. Keep her skills in mind as you read about Warren Peters, who struggled mightily to influence a higher ranking manager. And think of Nettie when you meet Anne Austin, a younger, more consciously ambitious woman, who also was working against her background as she tried to make contributions and get ahead in her Fortune 500 consumer goods company.