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WORK & FAMILY

From Loyal Sidekick to Partner

Career Makeover: How a Once-Shy Executive Raised Her Profile



Getting promoted can be hard if one is seen as a capable No. 2 at work. Moss Adams partner Star Fischer shares her story. Photo: David Ryder for The Wall



It's easy for someone who does a great job as a No. 2 to get pigeonholed as the boss's sidekick.

Star Fischer, 33, stepped out of the long shadow of her outgoing, entrepreneurial boss and shook off her old image as an able lieutenant by finding unconventional ways to document her achievements. Here's how she did it.

THE PROBLEM: Ms. Fischer never expected to have to promote herself. The first in her family to graduate from college, she says she chose accounting because "I thought I could hide in my seat and prepare tax returns. I was shy and timid." She joined Moss Adams, a Seattle-based accounting and consulting firm, as a college intern in 2001 and stayed on after graduation as a staff accountant in its Everett, Wash., office.

Tom Sanger, 44, a partner at the firm, noticed Ms. Fischer was “really smart, had a lot of ambition and wanted to learn and grow.” He recruited her in 2004 to join a new tax-credit consulting group he had founded at the firm. Consulting came hard to her at first, he says. It requires “thinking on your feet and asking questions” of clients. She was so shy, he recalls, “it was a challenge for her to even look them in the eye.”



Star Fischer, left, worked hard to make partner at accounting firm Moss Adams

Ms. Fischer never said no to any task he asked her to do, however and soon he began pushing her to recruit new clients, Mr. Sanger says. Ms. Fischer says she was so scared she sometimes spent 20 hours preparing to meet a client, and so stressed that she often cried when talking with her husband, David, about work in the evenings. Mr. Sanger encouraged her: “If you stretch yourself, eventually it will feel comfortable,” he told her.

His prediction came true. Ms. Fischer says she gradually began to enjoy working with clients. Mr. Sanger recalls he also pushed her to serve on internal committees, “where I knew she would shine and work harder than anyone.” She helped start Forum W, a networking group aimed at advancing women, in the Everett office and won a leadership award for her work.

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Ms. Fischer became a polished speaker, making presentations at industry conferences. “She went from not being able to look

somebody in the eye to really controlling the room,” Mr. Sanger says. The tax-credit group grew quickly to 16 employees at four locations serving all 22 Moss Adams offices. Ms. Fischer was promoted rapidly to senior manager—one level below her goal of making partner.

In 2012, however, she hit a roadblock. Mr. Sanger recommended Ms. Fischer for a partnership, but Chris Schmidt, Moss Adams’s chief executive, didn’t put her name on an initial list of invitees to “partner boot camp,” the biannual retreat where senior managers who are seen as top candidates network and meet with senior executives.

Mr. Schmidt says he wanted to make sure the timing was right. “She’s a good candidate, but I want to make sure she goes when she’s ready,” he says he told Mr. Sanger.

WSJ Radio

Sue Shellenbarger and WSJ This Morning's Gordon Deal discuss this career makeover



Mr. Sanger says he asked Mr. Schmidt to reconsider; later, she was added to the list. Sponsors who advocate for female colleagues are common at

Moss Adams, Mr. Schmidt says, and it's one reason 25% of the firm's partners are women, compared with about 19% industrywide, according to the Accounting Move Project, a research group.

Ms. Fischer asked to be considered for partnership immediately after boot camp. She was disappointed again when another senior partner told her she wasn't ready, she says.

The events showed she needed to raise her profile. Some partners still saw the tax-credit consulting group as Mr. Sanger's turf, and his outgoing personality eclipsed Ms. Fischer's self-effacing style. "I was in my boss's shadow," she says. Also, some senior executives saw the group as client-support people rather than rainmakers.

Ms. Fischer worried that if she failed to make partner, the hopes of employees she had helped recruit to the group would be dashed. Brian Short, a manager who says Ms. Fischer helped recruit and train him, was watching her progress. “If she didn’t make partner, I don’t know what it would take,” he says.

For the first time in 12 years at Moss Adams, Ms. Fischer says, she considered leaving the firm.

THE SOLUTION: Mr. Sanger says he and Ms. Fischer undertook “a big push to get others to understand who we are,” including her role in helping the group grow. Ms. Fischer knew she had helped recruit many clients. She often got “the first foot in the door” by giving advice to companies who later signed on for other services, says Marke Greene, a national partner who oversees the tax-credit and other specialty groups. Consultants also serve on teams that pitch prospective clients.

But when Ms. Fischer started work on her “partner book,” a binder candidates create to document their achievements for the selection committee, there was little internal data to document her contributions. The firm’s customer-relationship management software credited revenue from each client to just one owner, usually someone in accounting. The solution: “I made my own report,” she says.

THE IMPLEMENTATION: She got letters of recommendation from several partners, including Mr. Greene. Kurt Lippmann, leader of the firm’s national aerospace practice, says he told senior executives how Ms. Fischer had drawn on personal contacts to refer several new clients.

She also showed senior executives presentations she’d made and urged them to interview her colleagues. Mr. Short, the manager, says he told them Ms. Fischer was “the glue of our group,” training and helping advance subordinates.

All the self-promotion “was hard, because I’m sensitive to rejection. Being a self-advocate is the worst thing for me,” Ms. Fischer says.

Mr. Sanger also took risks, praising Ms. Fischer’s contributions so enthusiastically that some partners asked, “If Star is doing all this stuff, Tom, what exactly are you doing? Is she running this group?” he says.

Gradually they turned the tide. “The initial question, about whether she was working in my shadow, went away really quickly after other partners got to know her,” Mr. Sanger says.

THE OUTCOME: Earlier this year, the firm made Ms. Fischer a partner. Senior executives were impressed by her motivation and performance, and by her group’s rapid growth, Mr. Schmidt says. The firm has made some changes in its systems to reflect consultants’ contributions. And Ms. Fischer’s success, colleagues say, is seen within the firm as a model for consultants.

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Mr. Sanger and Ms. Fischer still work as a team, but her new higher profile has changed the dynamic a bit. She says Mr. Sanger sometimes reminds her of "how timid and shy I used to be," and often teases her, "Now you have too many opinions. You're burying us with ideas."

Still, Ms. Fischer says, "he'll always be my mentor."

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