



## 'Curbside' career advice

**Executive coach, Sherry Essen, helps up-and-coming employees climb into leadership positions by polishing their communication skills.**

**BY JULIE FORSTER**

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DAN SARTORI KNEW THAT to move up to partner at KPMG he would need to work on his "soft skills."

The 34-year-old senior manager in the audit practice of KPMG's Minneapolis office has worked for the firm for 13 years, gradually moving up the ranks. Now he doesn't want anything to derail his plans to become a partner.

With encouragement from his managing partner and the backing of KPMG, he hired Sherry Essen, 39, a leadership consultant and executive coach. Essen is working with Sartori to structure the delivery of his very technical messages to audit committees and high-level executives at public companies.

Her job: to enliven his presentations so they are more clear, concise and digestible by groups of non-accountants — and to work on his style.

"Accountants are by nature technical and precise people, but to convey that information without using technical and precise jargon is always a challenge," Sartori said.

While it is natural for him to fall into acronym-speak, he said, even the most alert listeners tend to nod off as he presents audit results.

That's part of the challenge for Essen, but one she takes on every day. A former management consultant for Vander Zanden in Minneapolis, she took a short sabbatical last year and then struck out on her own. With her personal savings, Essen founded the Springboard Group in Mendota Heights. Among her clients are managers



**Leadership consultant, Sherry Essen**, coaches client, Ann Ulrich. Among Essen's clients are managers moving into executive ranks at Fortune 500 companies who need to brush up on their leadership skills. "Often the skills that get you promoted are not the ones that will make you a good leader," she said.

moving into executive ranks at Fortune 500 companies who need to brush up on their leadership skills. Clients include Target Corp. and American Express Financial Advisors.

"What gets you promoted is not what makes you a good leader," she said.

When a company hires Essen, she'll perform what is known as 360-degree feedback. She interviews the person's clients, subordinates, superiors and others to figure out where the manager needs help. Then she rolls up the messages into a neat report and digs in.

The relationships she develops with clients are often close. In one recent case, an executive who had worked with Essen called her one morning in a rage over a compensation dispute with her staff. Essen talked her down, giving her a more effective and appropriate way to deal with the dispute.

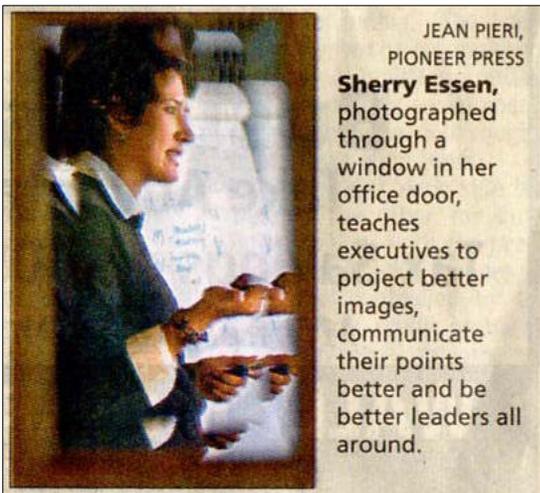
"What I hope to bring to my clients is common-sense, curbside advice," she said. "I pull them by the elbow and say, 'OK, I'm going to give it to you straight.' "

In another case, she worked with a manager of a global financial firm based in New York. The financial manager was an expert in Asian markets and wanted to expand her practice in the Asian markets, but she had to sell her ideas higher up in the organization. Essen worked with her to develop an effective, persuasive message.

Then there are the scores of small businesses and entrepreneurs who need help with their business strategy or to figure out the business's "story."

Essentially, her specialty is giving these small and mid-size businesses the curbside advice that is mostly available to high-level executives. She also presents communication-skills seminars for groups and gives career coaching to individuals.

Her prices range from \$150 per hour for a small-business client to \$250 per hour for a larger firm, or she works for a project fee — typically between \$3,500 and \$10,000 depending on project scope.



The landscape for such consultants is crowded. Essen competes with scores of independent consultants who specialize in marketing, communication, public relations and leadership development. Still, she thinks there's room for everyone who is "great" at what they do.

She has also picked up projects with a slim profit margin to get the referrals for the next job that may yield bigger margins.

Essen markets the business by attending lectures and networking. She makes it a point to stay in touch with key clients through social activities or company-sponsored events. She invested in an innovative Web site. The bottom line, she says, is that 100 percent of her business has been built through referrals and following up on leads from former clients, friends and colleagues.

At a crossroads, she is wondering whether to develop further a pilot program she designed for stay-at-home moms who want to re-enter the work force. Working alone, she's certain that she can't do it all.

Essen's own story is that she has held a variety of leadership, marketing, strategic planning and consulting positions since she earned her bachelor's degree in English and philosophy from the College of St. Catherine in St. Paul in 1989.

Her plan was to go to law school, but that quickly faded after she landed a job as director of admissions at the College of Visual Arts in St. Paul.

"I had energy and at that age was willing to work a lot," she said.

She moved up, serving as vice president and then interim president, overseeing a threefold increase in enrollment, a 300 percent jump in revenues and a major facilities expansion. She also has a master's degree in higher education and strategic planning from the University of Minnesota.

Along the way she also worked during the dot-com era as a recruiter for a tech company and later as a management consultant before starting her own practice.

She knew that she didn't want a consulting practice that was full of old management models, of lengthy assessments and rambling reports. Her clients were telling her that they were overwhelmed with information and that they needed less, not more. Her "curbside advice" covers everything from preparing a young professional for a difficult client conversation to rehearsing a team for a high-stakes pitch.

Now she has to take some of her own advice and focus on exactly what her business will be.

"You can only chase so many opportunities at once," she said.