

# Moving up through the ranks

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If you want to prime your company's management to consider you for a promotion, you need to take steps to develop an action plan explains Marie Herman



### Moving Up Through the Ranks

In many respects, it can be more challenging to move up within your own company via promotion than it can be to leave and find an opportunity at another company entirely. After all, unfortunately, sometimes in the company you are currently working for, you may have been pigeon holed into a particular role. Your co-workers may assume that they know your skills, talents and potential inside and out. Your current position may not offer you the opportunity to demonstrate that you are capable of more.

### Preparing to move up

If you have decided you would like to move to a role with different responsibilities, you have three options:

- 1 Expand your current responsibilities. Can you talk to management to modify your current job duties? Can you swap some responsibilities with a co-worker if there is mutual interest? As you look around the office, can you identify projects or tasks where you could step up and “show your stuff”? Sometimes it only takes a little tweaking to create the job of your dreams.
- 2 Look for promotion opportunities within the company. This will take effort on your part. Too many people wait for management to discover their talents and promote them. The reality is that management will assume you are happy in your present position until you advise them otherwise. Equally important, management’s first thought will likely be: If I promote Suzie, who will do Suzie’s job?
- 3 Pursue opportunities outside your company. If you first take the time to establish your dream job description, you will know whether any given opportunity will move you further along your path. You may choose to accept a lower level position than you desire if there is a greater level of opportunity associated with it. If that company strongly encourages professional development, has tuition reimbursement, promotes from within, etc. it may be worth a lateral transfer.

### Return evaluate what is holding you back

As you review the different methods of moving up, it is wise to give some thought to what might be holding you back professionally. Each of the advancement opportunities will require different strategies, but here are a few examples of typical obstacles.

- Familiarity – Do you need to be able to get past people’s earlier/current impressions of you?
- Skills – Do you have the skills the company needs?
- Personality – Does your personality mesh with the other employees?

- Who would do your current job? – If you are indispensable, you are not promotable. Consider cross training, documenting all procedures, etc.

It may feel like you have run into a brick wall, but with a little careful investigation, you can discover how to unlock the door that will allow you to move up through the ranks.

Talk to those in a position similar to what you wish to attain. Consider requesting mentoring from these successful individuals. Ask them for their honest assessment of your promotion potential. Ask them what they think is holding you back from moving up in the company.

Unfortunately even if we ask others directly for an honest opinion, we may or may not receive the feedback we need. Most people fear hurting other people’s feelings and will go out of their way to avoid providing negative feedback. Therefore, even though their critical comments have the potential to lead to improvements they will rarely share their insights.

You may not like some of what you hear from others or realize about yourself. Thank the individual for their honesty. Don’t launch into a defensive explanation of why the person is wrong. Step back and look at your behavior objectively. Ask yourself why others would have gotten this impression. Recognize that sometimes it comes down to semantics. One man’s pushy behavior is another man’s inspiration. Look at yourself through their eyes and consider their perspective. How do you come across? What are your word choices? Does your body language contradict your words?

Are you not taken as seriously as you would like to be? Your appearance could be one factor. Do you dress like a teenager? Success does not necessarily require you to wear cookie cutter suits, but a professional appearance is a valuable asset. Once you have proven yourself, you may have some additional freedom. Until then, either follow the code or consider other industries where dress codes are traditionally looser (such as advertising or certain technology sectors). If you regularly tap dance along the edge of what is acceptable in your corporate dress code, don’t be surprised if the powers that be don’t consider you ready for promotion.

What constitutes acceptable dress? If it would be appropriate at the beach, chances are it is not appropriate attire (unless you are a lifeguard or a bartender of course). This rules out tank tops (unless they are covered with a blazer or nice cardigan), capris, open toe sandals, exotic patterns, etc. Don’t show too much cleavage or more than a few inches above the knee. Look

around at your co-workers and try to dress one step higher.

What image do you project at work? Perhaps it is youthful exuberance and willingness to do anything. While these qualities might be appreciated in an entry level position, the company may be looking for a cool, calm, collected unflappable person for the upper levels. Image is more than clothing, although obviously your appearance is an important element. How you talk (your language skills, your ability to maintain confidentiality and not gossip), your personality and presence, ability to calm other people’s frazzled nerves, sense of humor and other elements all form the basis for other people to judge you. You must inspire confidence.

We are often our own worst enemy unwittingly sabotaging our best efforts. Do you engage in office gossip? Make promises that you don’t keep? Ignore deadlines and make other people scramble at the last minute?

When we act with little disregard for others, our actions often come back to haunt us. By acting ethically at all times, we build a reputation of integrity that people remember and respect. As Jiminy Cricket sings, always let your conscience be your guide.

Once you have the skills, you need to be able to communicate your capabilities to those in authority. All the skill in the world is of no use if you don’t project a self-confident positive image.

### Develop strategies to overcome issues

Interview appropriate people to learn the qualities that senior management is seeking. Ensure that you have those qualities and that management knows you have them. Think carefully about what objections they may have to promoting you. One of the most difficult things for most of us to do is to set aside our emotions and ego and hurt feelings and truly consider the perspective of others towards us in an unbiased accepting way.

In some cases, their familiarity with your work, history, and personality can work against you. If you have worked somewhere for a long time, they may have an outdated image of you. Perhaps they are unable to forget an incident that happened years before. Perhaps they are prejudging your ability to be flexible or how well you know a certain software or can perform a certain job function. They may feel that they know your personality and that you “wouldn’t get along with a certain supervisor” or wouldn’t be able to “handle the pressure”.

You may never be given the opportunity to prove that you can.

If you suspect that someone is uncomfortable with your age, consider what their objections are likely to be and prepare responses/actions to negate them. For example, many companies might have concerns that you would be too close to retirement, not technologically literate, or too “set in your ways”, etc.

You can overcome these issues in various ways: by noting your credentials, staying up to date with technology (perhaps even pursuing Microsoft Office Specialist certifications), explaining the cost saving steps you have implemented, stating your intention to work for “x” many years, etc. You need to address their concerns in a realistic and practical manner without appearing overly defensive yourself or putting them on the defensive.

Changing people’s impressions isn’t easy, but it can be done. Consistency and honesty are key factors.

#### Create action steps to implement those strategies

Review the job descriptions for the various positions in your job family. In particular look at the education requirements and job duties and ensure that you have or arrange for experience with all elements listed. Pay attention to any requirements or experience that you don’t currently have. Your company doesn’t have any job descriptions? Well now, that might be an excellent project to volunteer to initiate!

Have a frank conversation with your executive and/or human resources to discuss your career path in the company. Performance review time is a great time to do this, but it can be done at any time of the year. Ask them to tell you what you need to do to be considered for promotion. What responsibilities do you need to have? What technical skills do you need? What traits would they want you to show?

Offer to cover other positions during vacations. Ensure that you receive necessary training so you can do a good job. This may offer you an opportunity to showcase your talents and allow them to see you in a new light without risk for either of you.

Take on a new project that will raise your profile, particularly if it will make a process more efficient or save the company money. If asked to serve on a company-wide committee, even if it is outside your comfort zone, jump at the chance and use this as an opportunity to network and show others what you can do. Of course, for this technique to be effective, you need to do an outstanding job.

Take advantage of opportunities to blow your own horn. Encourage others to speak positively on your behalf. If someone offers you a compliment, say thank you and ask if they would put those kind words in writing with a copy to your boss. You’d be surprised how often people will actually follow through and do this. At the very least, there’s no harm in asking for what you want.

Pursue certifications and education in order to update or expand your skills. Possible considerations would be IAAP’s Certified Administrative Professional certification or ASAP’s PACE certification, for instance. Certification demonstrates to your executive that you take your career seriously and you are proactive and willing to put in the work to move ahead. While no guarantee of promotion, I know from following up with my past CAP study group students that they ended up promoted or in new jobs within a year or two of receiving their certifications. In many cases the certification process opened their manager’s eyes to the self-discipline of the employees and their willingness to do what it took to enhance their skills. In addition, a review of the certification exam outline was certainly eye opening for many executives and reinforced the value and breadth of what the employee was learning.

Be sure to document your efforts in your next performance review.

#### Sometimes you have to make choices

While I encourage you to investigate every possible option within your own company, the sad reality is that you may have to make a change to grow. If you truly believe that after taking all of these steps there is no potential for growth or development at your present company, it is time to look elsewhere.

Before making a final decision to leave, evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of staying in your current position. Perhaps it offers benefits that make it worthwhile even if you were never promoted, such as flexible time that allows you to be more present in your children’s schedules or a short commute. If it doesn’t have sufficient benefits to outweigh the stagnation of remaining in your present position, you may need to go to a new company in order to get the next level title and accompanying pay increase. Sometimes we cannot move beyond the mental biases of our current workplace and in order to grow, we need to leave that environment where we were a little too comfortable.

#### Ultimately your career is in your hands

More and more baby boomers are choosing to retire, creating job openings that many companies are scrambling to fill. The best thing you can do for your career is to plan ahead and take steps to be ready when the opportunity to get promoted comes along.

People have a tendency to believe that promotion opportunities are entirely within the control of the company and they have no say over what happens, but in fact, you can have a great influence on the promotion process by showing that you are proactive, always keeping your skills up to date and willing to go the extra mile as needed.

Your career is in your hands. Mold it to match your dream!

#### about the author



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