

Careers

# Getting Along: My New Manager Didn't Give Me the Promotion I Was Promised

by Amy Gallo

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**Summary.** Not getting a promotion you were promised can bring up a whole host of feelings, from frustration to resentment. In this article, HBR's advice columnist Amy Gallo answers a question from a reader who is facing this situation and offers advice and resources for how to work through their disappointment while keeping their career growing. [close](#)

*“Getting Along” is an advice column to help you tackle common — and messy — people problems, by workplace expert Amy Gallo.*

**Dear Amy,**

My previous boss promised me a promotion a year ago, but before it came through, they took another role in another affiliate. I now have a new manager, who gave the promotion to someone else. I'm trying to work through my disappointment. I feel empty and don't feel like I have an opportunity to progress my career at my company. Even though my manager is showing some sympathy and promising to work with me to help me get to the next step, I don't find it genuine; I know that it's likely what they've been taught in people retention courses. Also, I haven't seen any concrete effort from them even though I've been in the talent development program for years. What should I do?

*— Feeling Disappointed and Held Back*

## **Dear Feeling Disappointed and Held Back,**

I understand why you feel frustrated. To not get something that you expected — and were promised even — is incredibly disappointing. Of course, you are not the first person who has been in this situation, and you certainly won't be the last. People get passed over for promotions quite frequently and, unfortunately, like you, they often don't know why. It could be because of their performance, or office politics, or changes in company strategy, or a shift in the economic climate that's causing the organization's leaders to be more hesitant to give out promotions and/or raises.

In many organizations, the promotion process is often opaque. People too often don't know what criteria is used, what the timelines are, and who ultimately makes the call. Good managers try to reduce that ambiguity by being more transparent about the process and what's involved. This not only makes the process more fair; it also helps to make it more equitable by reducing the inevitable bias that creeps into the promotion process.

In addition to feeling your disappointment, I'd encourage you to reframe this situation as an opportunity to learn more about yourself and your position on the team, as well as your relationships with this new boss. It's certainly a setback and I'm sure your ego has taken a hit, but it doesn't need to drag you down completely.

So let's talk about what you can do to navigate this current situation and hopefully set yourself up for a future promotion, all while hopefully improving your relationship with your new manager.

### **1. Talk to your manager (again).**

I know you've already talked to your new manager about the situation and you haven't been satisfied with their response. But I'd encourage you to meet with them again to have a direct and frank conversation about your future on the team. They may continue to tow the party line and use tactics and lines they learned in people retention courses, but even if that's the case, at least you will have done all you can.

In that conversation, I'd suggest you do several things.

**Express your feelings and concerns.** Clearly express your disappointment and seek to understand what went into the decision not to promote you. You might say something along the lines of, "I know we've discussed this before, but I'm continuing to process my disappointment, and it would be helpful to understand more about the promotion process and how the decision was made." Listen to see how transparent they are and if they share explicit criteria for the promotion process. Ideally, you'll gain some insight into your manager's perspective and intentions, and you'll signal your desire for a more transparent working relationship.

**Reiterate your goal.** Since this is a new boss, it's very possible they made the promotion decision without the full context. They may not have been aware of the promise made to you, and they may not be familiar with your track record at the company. It's also possible that they don't know what your career goals are.

Explain to your new manager exactly what it is you want and why. It's best to come to this conversation armed with evidence to support your case, including highlights of your most valuable work and how it has contributed to the larger organizational goals, as well as any positive performance review feedback you've received in the past. Be sure to explain why you want to move up in the organization. Of course, most people want to progress in their careers, but if you can be specific about what's motivating your desire for a promotion, they will better understand, and hopefully appreciate, it more.

**Request feedback.** In this same conversation, you want to request specific feedback on your performance and potential areas for improvement. You can then use this feedback as a roadmap to refine your skills and demonstrate your value to the organization.

It's important that you not only ask and listen to their input, but also act on it. For example, if they indicate that you didn't get the promotion because of a lack of managerial experience, see if you can take a course on management or offer to manage an intern or

project that will give you more experience. Keep in mind that their feedback to you is about how you are perceived; it's not necessarily a reflection of reality. Your job is to change the perception of you and your skills to position yourself for a future promotion.

Leadership coach Amii Barnard-Bahn suggests being specific when asking for feedback and using questions along these lines:

- What could I have done better on project XYZ last week?
- What do you think I can do to establish my presence and become more visible to senior leaders?
- How can I get better at bringing my ideas to the larger team?
- What do you think is a strength that I need to leverage better?

**Ask for advice.** Another approach that been shown to work is asking for advice. Researchers have found that soliciting advice can “make you more likeable, encourage your counterpart to see your perspective, and rally commitment.” In other words, requesting their guidance on what you can do to earn a promotion next time may enlist their support. You might say, “If you were in my shoes, what would you do as a next step?” or “I’d love your advice on how I can set myself up for a promotion next time.”

## **2. Reach out to others.**

In addition to this conversation with your new boss, I'd also recommend that you reach out to others in the organization, starting with your old boss.

**Talk to your old boss.** It sounds like your previous manager is still with the company but in a different division. Is it possible for you to reach out to them to explain the situation and see if they have any advice? Whether they know you didn't get the promotion or not, they're likely to have further insight into the process. Of course, they may feel uncomfortable with the fact that they promised you something that you didn't get, so make clear to them that you're not harboring resentment; you're just trying to gather information to inform your next career moves.

**Expand your internal network of mentors.** It's rare that managers make promotion decisions in a vacuum. They often make those calls in concert with HR, their boss, or with input from their peers. If you have any current mentors, trusted advisors, or other allies, reach out to them. Don't use this opportunity to complain about the lack of promotion, but explain to them that you want to be sure you are in the running next time and ask for their advice and guidance. Author and workplace expert Shirley Davis explains in her article "What to Do When Your Boss Is Blocking Your Career Growth" that these people, "can provide you with an objective, outside perspective. They can gut check you, help you identify any counter arguments you may

need to address with your manager, and point out development gaps you may be overlooking. Some may even be willing to have mock discussions with you, playing the part of your manager, to help you prepare and be clear in your messaging.”

If you don't have people like this you can turn to, now would be a good time to identify a few potential allies. You want to look specifically for people who have influence at your company. In her article “How to Advance in Your Career When Your Boss Won't Help,” leadership coach Kristi Hedges writes: “In every organization there are centers of influence, some of which may not map to positional power. Think, for example, of the influence of a strategic adviser who retires from the executive team, or the CEO's long-standing assistant.... When you determine who the influencers are in your work, make yourself helpful to them. Look at what you can offer them rather than just what they can give you. Contribute to their efforts without expecting a short-term return. Trust in the long-term benefit of the relationship.”

### **3. Foster your relationship with your new boss.**

It sounds like you started off on the wrong foot and I can understand why you don't trust them. But if you want to stay in this company (more on that decision below) and get a promotion, you'll need to have a good relationship with them. They are likely to be instrumental not only in whether you move up the ladder but also in other key decisions like what projects you get assigned to and how your performance is evaluated.



So while you can express your disappointment over this issue, don't let it affect the tenor of your relationship. Look for common ground: What do you have in common? What can you connect over? Have empathy for the pressures they may be under. Help them achieve some early wins. Show them you're on their side, even if they haven't yet proven that they're on yours.

#### **4. Consider your other options.**

If you aren't satisfied with your boss's response to your requests for feedback, or you feel like you're genuinely not going to be able to advance in this organization, it may be time to consider other options — whether that's finding a new job at a new company or moving to a different team or department. Is it possible to follow your previous boss who seemed to support your career to the new division?

If you do decide you want to move on, bear in mind that quitting usually isn't an immediate solution, and certainly shouldn't be done impulsively. Give yourself time to spruce up your resumé, expand your network, and talk with people who may be able to support you in making the move.

If you're miserable but you feel like you can't quit just yet, set up some parameters for how long you'll stay. Seeing a light at the end of the tunnel will make the time until you can leave more bearable. You might tell yourself, "I'll stick it out for four months,

and if these three things don't change in the meantime, I'll start sending out my resumé." The key is to avoid feeling like you're stuck, which will only worsen your misery.

Finally, ask yourself whether you truly need the promotion to be happy in your job. While it's certainly demoralizing to not get a career boost that you were promised, and we all want to see progress in our careers, perhaps it's possible to make peace with where you are. Think through what exactly you most wanted from the promotion, whether that's respect, money, or opportunities to develop new skills, and see if there are other ways to achieve those things. It can also be helpful to note anything about that promotion that would've been tough. Were you spared anything by not getting it?

Lastly, remember that career paths are seldom linear, and setbacks can be opportunities for growth. I don't want to force you to see a disappointment as a positive, but you can use this moment in time to reassess what's most important to you and recommit to pursuing that.

*If you have a question you'd like me to answer in a future column, please reach out to me here.*

### **Additional resources:**

What to Do When Your Boss Won't Advocate for You

How to Brace Yourself for Disappointment

How to Talk to Your Boss About Your Career Development

What's Holding Back Your Career Development?

**Amy Gallo** is a contributing editor at Harvard Business Review, cohost of the *Women at Work* podcast, and the author of two books: *Getting Along: How to Work with Anyone (Even Difficult People)* and the *HBR Guide to Dealing with Conflict*. She writes and speaks about workplace dynamics. Watch her TEDx talk on conflict and follow her on LinkedIn.

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## Recommended For You

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### How to Gracefully Decline a Promotion



### Didn't Get That Promotion?



### PODCAST The Essentials: Building and Repairing Trust



### How to Steer Clear of Office Gossip

