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Business
Review**

Career Planning

Promotions Aren't Just About Your Skills – They're About Your Relationships

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February 04, 2021



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Summary. Too often, people early in their careers hit a wall when vying for opportunities to rise in their companies. This is often because they're focusing too much on developing their skills as opposed to building strong relationships at work. These five tips can help people who... [more](#)

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Have you ever been told, despite hitting or even succeeding at your performance goals, that you “just aren’t ready” for a promotion?

I remember hearing those same words early in my career. It's vague, frustrating feedback — and it isn't actionable.

Most of us hit a point in our careers where the emphasis we've placed on accomplishing goals doesn't return the same rewards. We've crossed an invisible line, and we usually don't know it until there are repercussions.

After more than 20 years as a Fortune Global 50 executive and coach to the C-Suite, I can tell you that this type of feedback often means that you've spent too much time building your skills — and not enough time building relationships.

What can you do to set yourself up for success? Here are five actions you can take right now and throughout your career to strengthen your relationships and put you on the path to promotion.

1) Know what makes you great at your job — and share your gift with others.

To be considered for promotion, senior management needs to see you're able to work well with others. After all, companies don't succeed through individual effort; they achieve results through collective leadership.

Chances are there's something special about the way you go about your work. Perhaps you think more strategically than others on your team, seeing trends and connecting seemingly unrelated pieces of information. Or maybe you're a clear communicator, saying what needs to be said in a way that ensures everyone will hear it and take action.

To identify what sets you apart, ask yourself: What you are known for? What types of problems do people frequently come to you to help solve? Take that skill and find a friendly way to share your gift with others to build relationships and add value to the team. For example, if you're good at presentations, offer to provide feedback on a colleague's dry run before their next big meeting. Or host a brown bag roundtable on best tips for presenting to executive management, where your team members can share their top recommendations.

If you can start demonstrating this capability now, management will more easily think of you in a role with additional responsibility.

2) Understand how others see you — and shift your perspective from “me” to “we.”

As you grow in your career, find opportunities to get feedback on how you show up to others. This will help you become aware of behaviors that may be decreasing your effectiveness and avoid blind spots in self-awareness that can slow your career progress.

Let's review a previous client of mine, Aaron, who was told by his boss that he "just wasn't ready" for promotion despite consistently exceeding his goals.

When I interviewed his colleagues, I discovered that Aaron was being blocked for a promotion two levels up in his organization by an executive who believed Aaron "wasn't a team player" due to the way he'd led a turnaround. Aaron had been handed the leadership of a highly tenured and underperforming team with a mandate to "fix it," and he went to work like a steamroller, reengineering operations and successfully hitting goals. But his success came at the expense of several long-time employees leaving and slamming Aaron's reputation on their way out. The executive with the power to promote Aaron now viewed him as a "lone wolf" achiever.

After Aaron and I worked together on *how* he achieves goals, he is now involving his team on strategy planning, listening more, and talking less — and the senior executive is noticing his shift from "me" to "we."

3) Mentor others to develop your leadership skills.

As the great Jack Welch said: "Before you are a leader, success is all about growing yourself. When you become a leader, success is all about growing others."

You may not be managing a team yet, but your earliest opportunities to lead others could come from volunteering. We learn best when we are teaching others.

One easy way to do this: Reach out to a person outside your business unit that would welcome your help and commit to spending an hour with them once a month for a year to work on an issue they raise. A few years ago, I mentored a young woman who was brilliant — and painfully shy. From a different business unit, she approached me as a safe confidant. She recognized that her lack of assertiveness was impacting her ability to influence and be heard. Over a monthly coffee, we worked out an action plan with small behavior changes to increase her confidence and executive presence that really added up over time. She was ultimately promoted, and I enjoy following her continued success.

A bonus — when you help others, you'll feel great, and they will thank you for it. I love receiving notes from former team members and colleagues about what they're doing now and how our work together helped them. It's one of the reasons I became an executive coach.

4) Learn how to work productively with personalities you find difficult.

Each of us has preferences in working and communication styles, and usually there are some people that we have greater difficulty working with than others. The earlier you can identify the specific

personality characteristics that are challenging for you, the more time you have to develop strategies for working effectively with them.

This is important because until you do, history will repeat itself. The triggering traits will resurface in other colleagues. When you take accountability for getting along with coworkers of all types, you eliminate friction and make it easy for management to promote you.

Remember, too, that relationships change over time. People mature, get promoted, and go on to work for other companies. One day you may find yourself reporting to your frenemy. Or they may leave to go work for your dream company, where you'd love an introduction. Take the long view and invest in your relationships — even those that don't come easily.

5) Set healthy boundaries in your work relationships.

It can be easy to fall into the trap of believing that extra hours will get you that promotion. However, to advance and take on more responsibility, it's really not about saying yes to everything. Rather, know which things to say no to. Be judicious and diplomatic, and learn to delegate.

Some things you should say yes to: Volunteering for cross-functional task forces and other opportunities to broaden your network, learn new skills outside your comfort zone, and earn the

support of other executives outside your direct reporting line.

But be intentional; aim for projects that are revenue-generating or strategic, such as those that will increase the efficiency and output of your organization. Avoid purely social ones (like the office party) or those that lack the necessary sponsorship to get off the ground. Start forming your diplomatic “no” skills early. Just because you may be more junior in seniority does not mean you need to take on everything that comes your way.

Once you’re consistently achieving results, your promotability comes down to relationships. If it’s clear to management that you attract followership among your colleagues and achieve results through others, the next time a promotion opens up, they’re likely to bet on you.

Amii Barnard-Bahn is a partner at Kaplan & Walker and the CEO of Barnard-Bahn Coaching & Consulting, a leadership firm that helps C-suite executives become exceptional. To identify your promotability gap, take Amii’s free assessment.

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