

**Harvard
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Review**

Feedback

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

by Nicholas Pearce

June 15, 2018



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Summary. A boss who doesn't advocate for you can stunt your growth and block your career opportunities. And you might not even know that you have an unsupportive boss. Most advocacy happens behind the scenes. When you found out you have one, the knee-jerk reaction is... [more](#)

Having a great boss is a potentially life-changing gift. On the other hand, many of us know firsthand that having a bad boss can cause a lot of drama, headaches, and stress. While it's easy to love the great bosses and flee the bad ones, there's one kind of boss that's much less straightforward to navigate: the boss who doesn't advocate for you.

You might not even know that you have one. Most advocacy happens behind the scenes and in conversations to which you yourself are not privy. As the adage goes, 80% of what's said about you is said when you're not in the room. Non-advocating bosses can refuse to bring up your name favorably in the promotion conversation. They can withhold critical developmental feedback and stunt your growth. And they can even overtly undermine you and attempt to sabotage your long-term career prospects.

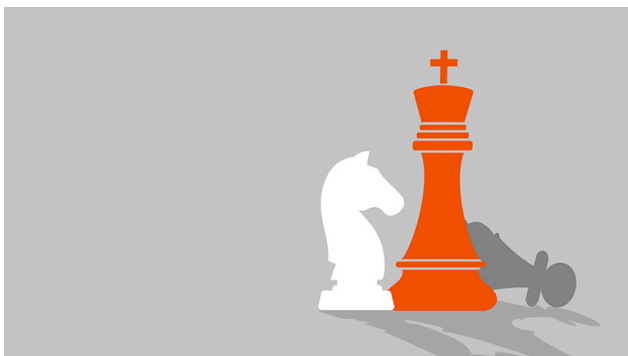
When you discover you have a boss who isn't advocating for you, the knee-jerk reaction is often to advocate for yourself and become your own PR machine. That's often a mistake. Too much blatant self-promotion in the workplace can backfire and signal that you are narcissistic, egotistical, and ultimately unconcerned

about the greater good. You ideally want others tooting your horn for you. Before taking action to close this critical advocacy gap, you'll want to understand *why* your boss isn't advocating for you.

First, consider the possibility that *you* are actually the problem. In other words, you may not have a bad boss — you just might not have developed enough or demonstrated the skill necessary for the boss to advocate for your advancement *yet*. Observe the characteristics and accomplishments of the rising stars around you to see where you might improve. Proactively solicit the gift of your boss's feedback and ask what it would take to earn their advocacy. And perhaps consider getting a coach to help you make the improvements necessary to earn your manager's advocacy. Seeking and applying your boss's advice could potentially move them to advocate on your behalf.

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When I first started teaching at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, I met with the dean to find out her expectations. I wanted to understand her perspective on what excellence looks like in my role so I could be intentional about my professional growth. Having these conversations early on with your boss can guide your goal-setting and position you to advance. Without this type of feedback, you might be falling short of your boss's expectations for promotability and not even know it.

Assuming your performance is strong — and ideally, exceeds expectations — if your boss isn't advocating for you, the issue likely lies with your boss. While it may not necessarily be your fault, it is your problem. You owe it to yourself to find a workable strategy to advance your career. Here are three steps you can take to navigate the advocacy gap.

Release your boss from your unmet expectations for advocacy. As unfair and frustrating as it seems when your boss doesn't advocate for you, it's in your best interest *not* to take it personally. There are countless possible reasons why your boss isn't advocating for you. Your boss might be insecure and see you as competition. Your boss may suffer from deep unconscious biases that lead to unfair evaluations of your performance and suitability for bigger roles. Perhaps your boss is trying to advocate for you but lacks the social capital and credibility to successfully advocate for *anyone*. Or, perhaps your boss may simply not want to be your champion. Whatever the reason may be for the advocacy gap, forcing, manipulating, or shaming someone into being your advocate won't work. Let go of whatever anger or hurt you have developed because of your boss.

Find another advocate. Ideally, you would have a direct supervisor going to bat for you from the get-go, but your boss isn't the only person in the organization who can advocate for you. There are other influencers who can give you the boost you need. To navigate your advocacy gap, you want to identify and win the support of executive sponsors. The ideal sponsor is a powerful, high-ranking ally within your organization who will bring up your name with the right people at the right time so that you gain access to opportunity. Your sponsor is your champion in the organization — and sometimes even beyond it.

Many people confuse mentors with sponsors. In short, mentors counsel you, sponsors accelerate you. You don't want to be over-mentored and under-sponsored. This is particularly important for women and people of color for whom, research shows, hard work alone is usually not enough to get noticed.

Sponsors typically choose their protégés. So, you'll want to strategically increase your visibility to gain their interest instead of explicitly soliciting their advocacy. For one, produce consistently excellent work. Raise your hand to participate in organization-wide task forces and cross-functional teams. By adding value to important strategic projects for the organization, you'll build your skillset, add to your experiences, and interact with new people. That way you can develop a reputation for being a reliable, growth-minded leader who is focused on the organization's objectives. Make it clear that it's in the organization's best interest to retain and advance you.

Build your network inside and outside of the organization.

The plain truth is that the best leaders have what I call 360° advocacy — that is, advocacy from those above them, those beside them (peers), and their direct reports. Don't underestimate the value of your peers and your direct reports in bringing your name up and speaking well of you. Being good to people and doing the right thing by people — especially those who may lack formal power in your organization — can cause them to want to advocate on your behalf. Finally, being an engaged citizen beyond

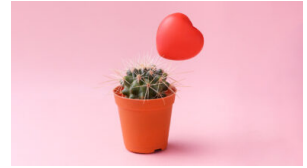
your workplace in your industry or your community can help as well. You never know who is connected to whom and how. Sometimes, generating positive buzz beyond the workplace can prompt your organization to take stock of how great an asset you are.

We all need champions who are willing to advocate for us when we cannot speak for ourselves. And when your boss doesn't do it, it can be downright challenging. But it doesn't have to stop your progress and career advancement. You could be just one project, one committee, or one conversation away from getting noticed for who you are, what you do, and your potential to achieve even more.

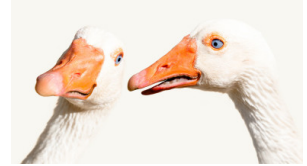
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