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Quest for the Corner Office

Getting promoted is more straightforward than it may first appear.

By Beth Huetter

Moving up the proverbial corporate ladder can be challenging, especially in a large company. Applying strategies and increasing skills will not only help your chances of being promoted, but will also help you in your current position.

One piece of advice that may seem elementary, yet is often overlooked, is first to utilize your manager or superior. "As a manager we're responsible for the development of our employees," says Julie-Ellen Acosta, vice-president of leadership development at Boeing (St. Louis, MO). Making your intentions clear to your manager is vital. "A person really does need to raise their hand and say 'I'm interested in moving up.'"



Under Consideration

When considering an employee for promotion, an employer looks at the employee's activity in their particular field and reputation among colleagues. This serves as an indication of their interest and capability in their current job, what they can do for the company, and therefore their transferability to a new position.

"We're looking for several things: patents, publications, are they a technical leader in the field, are they driving standards adoptions, are they known by their papers, what kind of reputation do they have in the technical industry," says Sharron Rotty, vice-president of human resources at Mentor Graphics (Wilsonville, OR).

"One of the key elements is how has this person demonstrated leadership in the jobs that they've had," says Art Wong, human resources director at Lawrence Livermore National Laboratory (Livermore, CA). "That's not just through management or supervision. It could be through things like how has this person inspired others, how have they influenced people, how have they made improvements, what new ideas have they championed."

Leadership is a skill that can be developed throughout a person's career, and is not about managing others, but rather about taking initiative, setting an example, and learning to be prepared.

"Managers look for people who can provide solutions. If Plan A doesn't work, have a Plan B and be flexible and open minded with new ideas," says Bernadette Cu-Todd, senior recruiter at Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (Berkeley, CA).

Broad Experiences

Contrary to the past, having a history of responsibilities in different roles and varied experiences is seen as a plus rather than a drawback.

"As you move up in a company, in order to go to the next level, or even to

move into an executive position, we're seeing more and more you've got to have a broader experience," says Acosta.

Employees seeking a senior-level position must be knowledgeable about all aspects of running a business. They might not necessarily have accounting, shipping, or marketing in their job descriptions, but they must know basic business principles in these areas and how they fit into the organization. For example, learning to read and understand financial statements and reports, and understanding financial planning and budgets are key job skills for any senior employee. The ability to evaluate talent in others and assign proper responsibilities to people is also essential when managing at any level.

A manager must also be able to realize their own limitations, and know when they need additional training or should ask for outside expertise. "As you move up you really need to become more humble," says Acosta.

One strategy for employees to learn more about their companies, practice job skills, and make connections is through volunteering. "When you volunteer, you get to develop and practice skills that you might not get to do in your current job," says Wong.

Volunteering on a committee at your company, with a local organization, or through a technical society can provide great experiences beyond those available in your current position. Opportunities through SPIE, for example, allow volunteers to gain organizational, technical, and financial skills.

In fact, not trying out new things can be detrimental to a career. Wong warns that if an employee doesn't stay aware of the company's trends and branch out their skills, their job might become obsolete.

Long-Term Investment

Despite the speed at which today's technology and jobs move, loyalty still counts, and getting a better job doesn't have to mean leaving the organization. A Harvard study of Fortune 500 companies in 2005 found that jumping from company to company was a good way to move quickly into an executive position in younger companies (founded less than 30 years ago), but was not the case for long-standing organizations.

"We have a lot of employees that have been here 15, 20 years or more," says Amy Buck, senior director of global talent at KLA-Tencor (San Jose, CA). "Our CEO, for example, started here as an applications engineer."

Companies cite cultural fit, training, and reputation as the main reasons they'd rather recruit internally.

"All organizations have a culture for how things are done. Knowing how to get things done in the organization and having built up credibility with others in the organization are strong positives for promoting from within," says Roz Brown, media relations manager at Ball Aerospace & Technologies Corp. (Boulder, CO).

National laboratories have especially unique cultures, and cultivate employees with the idea they will spend their careers at the lab. This doesn't mean employees have the same job their whole career, however.

"Even though I've been at Sandia 25 years, I've actually rotated my position. In fact, almost every seven years I've moved to a different position," says Wen Hsu, a manager in the remote sensing group at Sandia National Laboratories (Livermore, CA).

In younger companies, "there's so much of a focus on the here and now, both

in terms of hiring and in some cases promoting, whereas at Sandia there's a longer term view to things," says Margaret Quinn of the staffing department at Sandia.

Whether in a young or established organization, the overall strategy for employees who want to move up in a company is straightforward: take action. Ask questions, look for key assignments, take advantage of education opportunities, make connections, and volunteer. By doing these things, you will significantly improve your chance of advancement.

Wiggle Room

Today, people are not always choosing to move up the corporate ladder. Some are choosing to move down, around, to another ladder, or stay put. Advancing your career without moving up is possible.

"Career advancement has to do with moving within an organization and being able to experience different types of roles," says Margaret Quinn of Sandia National Laboratories (Livermore, CA). Some employees find their perfect job niche, or have time commitments outside of work, or maybe the timing is just wrong.

If you are offered a promotion you don't want or can't take, thank the manager and discuss with them why you currently do not wish to be promoted, and how this choice is beneficial to both you and the company. Let them know if you would be interested in the future, and remind your manager you are willing to help out and possibly take on more responsibilities.

Beth Huetter, SPIE Staff Editor

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