

4 Career Strategies for Rapid Promotions

The Power Moves | 13 April, 2020 | by Lucio Buffalmano

Effective career strategies make the difference between a steady, safe, and *slow* climb to the top, and an *elevator* ride to the top.

This post will explore the best career strategies for the quickest possible career progression.

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1. Ask Early For What You Want (Before You Deliver)

This is rule #1.

If you take one thing away from this post, is this: express interest for the position you want, as soon as possible.

Remember: “a closed mouth never gets fed”. The mouth that asks for promotion is far more likely to get it than the mouth that keeps shut.

Even if the mouth that keeps shut does slightly better work, the mouth that asks will snatch that promotion 9 times out of 10.

When you don't ask, your boss will often think that you are OK to stay where you are, with the salary you are currently receiving.

Sometimes, managers will actually think that you are *happy* to remain where you are.

Even if you do *great* work, they might think you are a rockstar -happy to do great work- instead of a superstar -hungry for career advancement-.

Human psychology also suggests that managers subconsciously believe that the people who ask for the promotion are readier and more suited for that promotion -even when that might not be the case-.

So, bottom line?

Ask.

1.2. When to Ask? Right Away

You want to ask as soon as possible.

As a matter of fact, straight from the interview:

You: given my experienced, I am confident I can do great work for you. I am eager to start, and I am also an ambitious man, so I'd like to know about career opportunities. What do you like to see from me to help me advance?

Of course, there is a time and place when to. Too early, and you look like you're entitled. Too direct, and you look overpowering.

You must ask when you've already established that you're a good candidate. Once they want you, then it's the right time to start talking about your career ambitions.

See Social Power for the exact best moment to ask.

If you haven't asked at the interview, it's OK.

Just ask at your next meeting.

And remember, the reverse is also true, and equally, if not more, important:

! Never Ask *After* You've Delivered Great Work !

Asking after you have done a lot of good work puts you in the weaker negotiating position.

If you have delivered a big one-off win, like you onboarded a big customer, worked 1 month around the clock for the IPO, or implemented cost-saving solutions, then your leverage has already disappeared. The company already enjoyed your big win, and you can't take it away. **Negotiating on what you have done in the past is weak negotiation.**

If your work is cumulative or recurring, then you're in a better position. But you're still negotiating sub-optimally. The manager has already received a good chunk of your good work, which decreases his incentive to reward you for what he's already bagged.

And there is an even bigger danger in asking late.

Delivering great work without asking for advancement turns that great work into baseline expectations.

When you ask after you've delivered and shown a lot of your value, your manager will always, without fail, reply one of these two to your requests of advancement:

Boss: "just keep doing this great work and we'll talk about it"

or, even more common:

Boss: "for that promotion, just do better than what you've done so far"

Now your previous good work, your weekend calls, and your long work hours have become the baseline, and you are condemned to keep doing more and more.

When you deliver without asking, you trap yourself in a race against ever-increasing work-commitments.

Dealing With The "You're Being Paid For Good Work" Power Move

Sometimes your manager will tell you that you are already receiving a salary for your good work, so you're doing what it's expected.

Basically, he is saying that you have no right to ask for advancement. First off, realize you have a terrible manager who doesn't know how to deal with people.

But, unluckily, that's common.

What you want to reply here is that yes, he is right, and that you are happy to be where you are.

The salary is for work. And if he agrees that you are delivering above-average work, then wouldn't it be fair to also talk about advancement?

Most of all though, no matter how big of a dick is your manager, you want to avoid making it a "me VS you". Remember that influence is about power, and if you make your attempts at influencing too obvious, you will make your boss defensive and, potentially, angry.

So, instead of convincing him you're doing great work, ask what he wants to see more, and then ask for

feedback on how to get there (more on it later)

1.3. How Much to Ask For: 10% More of Your Work-Value

You want to ask proportionally to your work-value.

Early on your work value is linked to your technical skills and the quality of the work you deliver. Later on it will be linked more to your team results, and your “exec skills”.

In any case, you want to ask slightly more than your work-value would otherwise warrant:

[Always ask for a little bit more than your work would warrant](#)

I know, asking slightly more is uncomfortable.

But that’s what maximizes returns.

Sometimes, asking for *a lot* more will give you huge, unexpected wins.Â

If you’re not sure of your value, it *might* pay off to start with a crazy demand. There are many situations in both life and work when that’s the case. But it’s a risk, and you might come across as irrational if you overdo it.

It’s best to come up with a realistic figure, or position you might aspire to, and then ask for just a little bit more.

That way, nobody can say that your demands -or you- are out of touch with reality, and nobody will think that you’re an entitled prick. Instead, you will come across as “confidently stating your case”, which is what’s most likely to get you promoted.

The second reason I insist that you ask for a little bit more is that most people usually ask less -or not at all-. Forcing yourself to ask more will fix one of the biggest problems that plague the “too nice employees”.

Again, if you haven’t done it so far, the first time you ask for what you want will be challenging. And that’s exactly why you must do it.

If you need help, stop looking at what you have so far and go read about the salaries and perks of those far above you. When you will realize their work and personal value does not probably justify that big of a difference, your motivation to ask for more will soar.

1.4. How to Ask: Ask for Guidance to Reach Your Career Goal

There is a danger that if you ask too directly or too strongly for what you want, you will annoy your manager.

Instead of mitigating that risk, you can turn into an advantage.

How? Instead of telling your manager what you want, you first air your ambition as goals, and then you ask for guidance on how to reach it.

If you’re doing good work, this will put you in a winning position: your manager cannot -and does not want- to deny that you’re doing good work.

So he is forced to admit that yes, you moving towards your goal.

This will also allow you to get that clear, [radical-candor feedback](#) that is so invaluable to your growth (more in Social Power).

As he gives you feedback, [you will play the astute politician](#). You take note, you say “aha”, you thank him, and then you show that you’re working on his advice. Now, you are turning your boss into a mentor.

The final step is to make sure you are not one of those “eternally getting close and never getting it”, so you will ask for more concrete timelines.

Once you have a timeline for your next promotion, you are fast-tracking yourself upward.

When you execute this move well, you become one of those open mouths that the manager feels compelled to feed. And he even feels good about it, because he helped you along the way with his feedback.

2. Work Hard & Network, Cheating is Too Costly

[One study](#) by Kyl-Heku and Buss and has identified three major tactics to get ahead in hierarchical structures:

1. **Deception/Manipulation**: Derogate and exclude others; ingratiate self with superiors; use sex; “sell” your results; use deceptive self-promotion (e.g., claim credit for the work of others).
2. **Social Display/Networking**: Cultivate friendships; display positive social characteristics; participate in social events; enhance appearance.
3. **Industriousness/Knowledge**: Work hard; display knowledge; obtain education or knowledge; organize and draft strategies for the company; assume leadership.

All three tactics can be effective in Western organizations.

However, the Industriousness/Knowledge tactic is most highly correlated with educational attainment. And both Deception/Manipulation and Industriousness/Knowledge are positively correlated with actual salary.

So, yes, the use of the Deception/Manipulation tactic can also be effective, but it comes at a personal cost.

Those who used deception and manipulation *did* get results, but had *significantly* lower life satisfaction.

I suspect this is the case because the cheaters feel like they are faking it, they are less confident and more anxious about getting caught, and present a higher incidence of “[impostor syndrome](#)”.

It’s a bit like when you take the bus without a ticket. You’re saving money, but you’re a bit tense. And unless you’re a [sociopath](#) or very poor, you also know you’re not being the best version of yourself that you can be.

So, from this research, it convenes that it’s best to work hard, network, and play politics ethically. And avoid deception.

Also see:

| [Manipulation: Techniques, Strategies, & Ethics](#)

3. Adapt Your Strategies To Your Position

The best strategy will vary depending on what point of your career you are at.

This is what works best:

3.2. As an Individual Contributor, Focus on Skills + Boss Relationship

To go from individual contributor to manager, focus on team contribution and work (doing a great job), and developing a good relationship with your boss.

First-level managers are more often promoted on technical skills and individual contribution rather than on soft-skills, and that's why work-related knowledge (technical skills) and doing a great job should be prioritized first.

You also have little status in the company, no title, little track-record, and a limited network. And, let's say it as it is, people don't exactly jump at the opportunity to network with junior employees. People see junior employees as of little use, so you might be struggling to get to know any higher-ups. That's why, at this point in your career, your manager has an outsized impact on your future.

Finally, in some companies, the first step to management is "team lead", which is between you and the real boss. In those cases, the relationship with your boss is even more important.

Don't Over-Focus on Power, It's OK to Be "Nice"

Several career coaches say that being "nice" at this point in your career can be an advantage.

Even being "overly nice" at this point of your career can help.

If you're really junior, doing things like getting coffee and jumping at any opportunity to help can ingratiate you to everyone around. It can and make up for a lack of skills and give you real opportunities later on.

It's when you move forward that being "too nice" can come back to bite you in the ass.

But at this stage, **focus less on power and more on being liked.**

Because the flip of the coin is also true: nobody likes an executive who is a dick. But people hate a junior employee who's a dick even more. And the dickish newbie will kill his career before it even starts.

3.3. As a Manager, Focus on Networking + Exuding Confidence & Ambition

To go from management level to the executive level, you must focus on things like networking, confidence, public speaking, and ambitious.

Sadly, for Machiavellian efficiency, you should focus more on networking and less on your team. If all you do is being a good boss, you'll stay stuck there.

[Says](#) career coach Helgesen:

If you allow your energy to be consumed by conscientiously tending to your team's needs, you will primarily prove that you are superbly suited for remaining in an internally facing position. The management skills that have gotten you here will end up keeping you here, instead of helping you rise to a place where you could have maximum impact.

This is also backed by research.

[Fred Luthans](#) studied for four years successful managers -as in getting promoted- and effective managers -as in having productive teams-, and he found out that the successful ones did not overlap much with the effective ones.

Effective managers spent most of their time nurturing and helping their teams. Instead, **the successful managers spent less time with their teams and more time networking and promoting themselves** outside their departments.

Prioritize Ambition & Power Over “Niceness”

Non-ambitious, nice people can and often do make it to the manager level.

But [executive levels require different skills](#) and mindsets. It requires ambition, and assigning a high priority to your career.

That’s why it’s even more important at this stage that you talk up your eagerness to move ahead and do more.

Being seen as “nice” and “kind” here can be risky, since execs are promoted on competence, ambition, and driving results.

You can combine kindness and success. As a matter of fact, they work great, like [Fran Hauser](#) both proves and teaches. But you must be double careful that “nice” will never be confused with “pushover”.

Also see:

- [How to look to the executive part](#)

| [17 Tips to Exude Exec-Level Confidence at Work](#)

3.4. As An Exec, Focus on Risk-Taking (Men), or Precision (Women)

Says executive coach Carlos Marin:

| [Coaching data and the psychometric surveys we deliver when doing assessments suggest that men at the executive level are most likely to be rewarded for daring and risk-taking](#)

At exec level, you’re supposed to drive revenues. Promotions often follow on revenue increases or cost-cutting. And to deliver those, you must risk.

If financial crises are anything to go by, the game in big corporations is this: take large risks, spend big and pocket the profits. If things go south, disappear or ask for a bailout. This is exactly what’s happened with the banks in 2008 and with the airlines in 2020.

If you’re a woman though, Marin says that you’re more likely to be rewarded for precision and correctness.

In my opinion, this reflects the reason why different genders are hired in the first place. The women, [slightly higher in conscientiousness](#) and far higher in pro-sociality, are expected to keep a well-running department. Men are expected to take more risks and drive revenues.Â

4. Find a Sponsor

Mentors [increase your power in the office](#).Â

And they also help you advance faster.

Albeit not all researches reach the same conclusion, the evidence as a whole shows that’s the case.

It couldn’t be any different, after all.

A mentor is nothing but a close relationship with a senior member. A senior member who can make introductions to other powerful people, say good things about you at a level where it matters, and share

crucial company-relevant information that you wouldn't otherwise have access to. And that's on top of the actual advice of someone who's been there, and done that.

[Research says](#) that mentors are even more important for women's career advancement.

Pat Heim says women benefit even more from a mentor because it helps them learn the unwritten rules of male culture ([Heim, 1992](#)).

Mentors Advice, Sponsors Promote

Mentors give you advice and help you triangulate ideas.Â

Sponsors can do that as well. But, most importantly, they also actively promote you, seek to assign you to high visibility projects, or put you candidacy forward for the next promotion.

Having a sponsor is like taking a lift instead of the stairs.

The easiest way to get a sponsor is to turn a mentor into a sponsor. If you can [click and bond](#) with that mentor, then chances are that he will naturally help you up.Â

4.2. To Find a Sponsor, Show Potential

Tips on how to find a mentor?

From a power dynamics perspective, and [some research confirms](#), the key is this: since mentees and proteges are allies to their mentors, both **mentors and sponsors prefer people who already look on a path to success**.

So never approach a mentor with the attitude of someone who needs help and rescue. Approach them with the attitude of someone who's going places and who can go just that little bit faster with their help. And as someone who will remember who has helped them along the way.

Again, we go back to the basics:

- [Show power + warmth](#)
- [Fundamental laws of power](#) (develop power alliances)

This is a preview from [Power University](#), the workplace module, where there are more real-life examples and practical advice.

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