

Scaling the Corporate Ladder

It's good to be the boss. People in charge of an organization not only make more money, but they also have happier family lives, are more satisfied with their work, and worry less about their financial futures, according to a Pew Research report. Those in the top levels consider their employment a "career," not just a job that pays the bills.

Of course, promotions to those top levels are never guaranteed. However, there are a number of steps you can take to improve your chances of advancing your career – whether with your existing employer or a new one. Long-term success relies on having as many options as possible and ensuring that you're prepared when an opportunity arises.

What You Need to Advance in Your Career

Getting to the top of the corporate food chain becomes increasingly more difficult in the higher tiers of management. In many organizations, average performers in the lower ranks can expect some promotions by merely being competent and building tenure. Attaining more senior positions or advancing at a faster rate, however, requires the following elements, at the very least.

1. Evaluating Corporate Opportunities

The more opportunities available to you, the better. For example, a rapidly growing company is dependent upon numerous managers to implement its strategies, whether introducing new products, expanding into new geographic territories, or capturing a larger market share. At the same time, a growing company typically takes risks - some of which may be in the "bet the company" category - to meet profit targets or expand into new markets.

Successful small companies can become acquisition targets for larger competitors. If their efforts are successful, the acquirer typically cuts redundant staff and replaces poor and average performers with their own people. In other words, the choice to work for a small growing company is a high risk, high reward proposition for an ambitious employee.

On the other hand, mature companies that already dominate an industry may have slower career paths but may provide valuable experience and security for those willing to wait for their turn in corporate leadership. If the company chooses to blend acquisitions and internal growth to achieve profit targets, the opportunities for advancement can exceed those of a smaller company with less risk.

Many mature companies have policies aimed at inducing turnover at the top levels. They may offer early retirements, buy-outs, and titles with higher compensation but no authority or responsibility – a kind of in-place retirement – to retain younger, aggressive managers who might otherwise leave the company. Your selection of employer is a critical element in the speed of your progression up the ranks.

Surprisingly, according to the Pew report, a greater percentage of employees are satisfied in their current position (43%) than those seeking promotion (39%). Nevertheless, competition increases as you climb the ladder, just because there are fewer and fewer jobs the higher you get. Many may hear the call, but not many are chosen.

2. Getting the Lay of the Land

Every company has a culture, whether intentionally or informally developed. It is the company's personality and includes shared values, ethics, and expectations that govern employee behavior. Ignoring an established culture is one of the worst errors a new employee can make, effectively inviting battles without knowing your foes or having a battle plan.

A company's public statements and recruitment conversations can vary significantly from day-to-day behavior. As a consequence, new employees, eager to make a significant impression, may be admonished with the comment "That's not the way we do things around here."

Before implementing your plan to get ahead, take the time to understand the rules of the game you are playing. Sun Tzu, a Chinese General who lived more than 2500 years in the past, is a recognized master of strategy. His comments in the Art of War are as valid in the workplace as the battlefield: "If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle."

3. Avoiding Company Politics

Company politics are a fact of life in an organization, especially businesses. Psychologists claim that the need for power and control is innate in humans and animals underlies the desire to climb the company hierarchy. As a consequence, cliques and factions arise, especially around those contending for the corner office. Participating in company politics is always a risk since being associated with the wrong side invariably leads to career setbacks.

Some years ago, I advised a newly-hired CEO of a major public company. My client had been brought in from the outside due to the Board's unwillingness to choose one of two senior vice-president vying for the position. Enmity between the two officers' supporters was overt and destructive. Despite the reputations of the two rivals - both were considered highly capable in industry circles - the CEO replaced both men, sending a message to the remaining officers that results, not politics, would be the basis for future promotion. While the executives lost their positions, the careers of their perceived followers were also stalled. If you want to get ahead, avoid unhealthy alliances and personal conflicts with other employees. Treat all people with respect and courtesy.

In the open range of the West - before barbed wire fences - cattle from multiple would often intermingle, requiring an annual round-up to collect and separate the cows and newly-born calves. Each ranch had a distinct brand, a cattleman's coat of arms so to speak, that identified the ranch owner and a sense of identity for the cowboys who worked at the ranch. Ranch owners and company bosses expect loyalty from their employees. To a cowboy, "riding for the brand" meant putting the ranch owner's interest above their own, regardless of danger or difficulty. If you are

faced with choosing one side or another in office politics, keep in mind that you too are riding for the brand.

4. Getting Noticed by Those Who Matter

A popular supposition about artists, singers, and other creative types is that the unknowns who never achieve fame have as much, if not more, talent than superstars. Whether true or not, it doesn't matter if you're an expert in a particular field if no one knows who you are. Companies are filled with nameless employees who spend years toiling in the trenches without recognition. Professional notice is the result of deliberate strategies and efforts to obtain it.

- **Seek Employer Feedback.** People often passively wait for their annual or semiannual employee reviews. Unfortunately, those reviews are often attempts to justify terminations or avoid lawsuits. Develop the habit of seeking feedback from your direct supervisor regularly, especially after every project. Take note of compliments and criticisms, modify your performance where necessary, and involve your boss in those efforts – your achievement reflects well on them.
- **Volunteer for Extra Work.** Look for ways to make your superior's job easier. Employees who help their bosses stand out become visible to additional supervisors who may have opportunities as well. When you do extra work, be sure you complete the assignment on time and as expected.
- **Participate in Company Activities.** Being active in company social events, sports teams, and sponsored charities exposes you to more people who can help along the way. Whenever possible, do favors for other employees without any expectation of a quid pro quo. Over the course of a career, you never know who might help you with a recommendation, an introduction, or valuable advice.

And be sure to proceed thoughtfully. A personal human relations campaign can easily be misunderstood by your superiors and resented by your fellow workers if done inappropriately. Remember, it's important that your efforts be sincere and not viewed as attempts to fool colleagues or ingratiate yourself with a boss. To impress your superiors, seek to convey an attitude of selflessness, not selfishness.

5. Finding Mentors

Richard Branson, the founder of Virgin Group Ltd., wrote that mentoring is the missing link between a promising businessperson and a successful one. He believes that success takes "hard work, hard work, and more hard work. But it also takes a little help along the way." Even genius needs help now and then as was recognized by Sir Isaac Newton in a letter to fellow scientist Robert Hooke in 1675: "If I have seen further [than other scientists of this time], it is by standing upon the shoulders of giants."

A mentor is someone who has traveled the journey before you, knows the ins and outs of an industry or organization – and its people – and is willing to give you authentic, unvarnished assessments and advice. Mentors may be within or outside the company. A good mentoring

relationship can speed your progress, smooth bumps in the road, and help you avoid the obstacles that can derail or destroy a career.

Finding a mentor is more than identifying someone to be exploited for their contacts and sponsorship. Mentoring is a two-way relationship, much like a pupil and teacher. Find mentors who recognize your talent, genuinely cares for you, and exposes you to other successful people. Do not be afraid to ask for assistance and advice – the most successful people had help along their journey, and many of them are willing to give back.

Consider having several mentors at once, much as a CEO works with a Board of Directors. In my career, I've been fortunate to have the advice of many wiser and more-experienced businesspeople. In most cases, our relationship spanned a lifetime, hopefully, a mutual pleasure but certainly to my great advantage.

6. Nourishing a Personal Network

As you progress in your career, spending time at different management levels and possibly other companies, there are ample opportunities to make valuable business and personal contacts that may be helpful as time goes by. Unfortunately, most people jump from one position to another, eventually forsaking comrades of the past to embrace those of the present.

Apart from the lost emotional benefits of sustained relationships, career nomads squander the opportunity of their former colleagues' advice and experience. President George H.W. Bush was well known for the thickness of his Rolodex, a collection of acquaintances, friends, and business associates over a lifetime. President Bush maintained his personal network through occasional favors, letters, cards, and phone calls. A significant factor in the elder Bush's success was his ability to reach out for advice and assistance when needed. Many political observers credit the political success of George W. Bush to his father's contacts.

Maintaining a network can be tedious and tiring at times, but the benefits more than justify the effort to stay in touch. Friendship is reciprocal. When it is possible to help someone, do so gladly without strings attached. Never burn bridges and keep your relationships in good shape.

The value of a network grows as it expands and is nourished with thoughtful effort. The young woman sitting in the adjacent cubicle may be the CEO of a Fortune 500 company one day while a golfing buddy rises through the ranks of executives of your biggest supplier.

7. Putting Your Best Food Forward

Attracting attention for the right reasons is critical as promotions are not just the outcome of visibility, luck, or sponsorship. If your work habits, capabilities, and track record are not exceptional, you are unlikely to get the rewards you seek. Mediocrity in performance usually results in a mediocre career, so if you want to get ahead, you have to bring something to the table besides "ordinary."

Some people are extraordinary because they achieve an unlikely and unexpected result in a single instance – for instance, the super-salesman who breaks a long-standing sales record, the

engineer who designs a new product, or the production manager who significantly improves quality without cost increases. Other folks are extraordinary because they consistently deliver the goods every time without excessive supervision, delay, or histrionics – the "no muss, no fuss" people supervisors can always rely on. Extraordinary is more a matter of attitude and effort than skill or knowledge. It is available to anyone willing to put in the work.

8. Maintaining the Optimum Skill Set

If you lack the minimum requirements to practice your profession, no mentor, connections, or experience can enable you to do your job. Depending upon your field, there are likely to be minimum technical capabilities and educational benchmarks you must master to perform at any level, much less advance.

In addition, specific management and personal skills are universally needed in every organization. Those who master these skills are the formal and informal leaders of a company, able to influence others and promote exceptional results. Examples of these capabilities include the following:

- **Strong Communication Abilities.** As you progress up the management ladder, the ability to educate, persuade, manage, and motivate subordinates and peers is essential. Similarly, you must communicate expertly to superiors.
- **Social Competence.** As you ascend in an organization, reliance upon and rapport with direct reports and superiors is essential. Those most likely to promote you are the ones whose careers depend upon your performance. Steadiness, consistency, truthfulness, dependability, and charm are social traits to be developed and practiced in all instances.
- **Problem Solving.** Critical thinking – the ability to dissect a problem, identify root causes, understand relations, and rationally assess likely outcomes – is a highly valued capability in every level of an organization. Critical thinkers can minimize the consequence of potential disasters and recognize overlooked opportunities. Like many skills, it can be learned and practiced.

9. Recovering from a Setback

Unless you are the boss's son or daughter, your career path is likely to be uneven, with periods of apparent stagnation and occasional failure. Setbacks can be self-inflicted or out of the blue - not getting a promotion or raise you expected, receiving a poor performance review, or your project's failure. Whatever their nature or cause, how to react to disappointment is critical to getting back on the right track.

According to a poll reported by the Harvard Business Review, one in five experiencing a setback reject any personal responsibility and blame others for the failure. They take too much credit for their successes and blame others for their failures. In their anger and disappointment, they are most likely to quit either on the job or formally, compounding the severity of the consequences.

My first job after college graduation with a degree in industrial engineering was with one of the largest farm equipment manufacturer in the world. My plant employed more than 3,000 workers,

most of whom were members of the UAW and covered with a detailed bargaining agreement. Midway through my first year, I decided that union members in a particular department were circumventing work rules and costing the company over \$1 million annually.

When I expressed my feeling to my manager, he disagreed with my conclusion and directed me to focus on my regular duties. Being young and confident I was right, I continued to pursue the project, ultimately producing a multi-page report complete with pictures and operating data.

Chaffing under my previous criticism, I did not consult with my manager but sent my report over his head to the plant manager. I then waited for the accolades that were sure to come, perhaps an immediate raise or promotion. Much to my surprise, the reaction was an official black mark on my company record and a profanity-filled lecture from my boss. Like the 20% in the Harvard poll, I was sure that my analysis was correct and that I had been unfairly treated. I left the company three months later.

After considerable self-analysis and feedback from friends and family, I realized that my actions had triggered the event and my inflated ego was the cause. Accepting that I did not know everything and regularly made mistakes was difficult to acknowledge but enabled me to become a better employee and manager in later years.

From that early experience, I learned to limit my self-pity and disappointment and then proceed to a thoughtful analysis of the situation. What went wrong? What were the causes? What had I done right? And wrong? What steps can I take to avoid a repeat incident? I apply a similar attitude to success, relying on the wisdom attributed to Winston Churchill: "Success is not final; failure is not fatal; it is the courage to continue that counts."

10. Knowing When to Change Course

Unfortunately, there may be times when circumstances dictate a new beginning or company. The trigger might be an unexpected call from a headhunter offering a promotion and a substantial raise. Or when those most familiar with your work overlook your capabilities or achievements, especially if success is slow developing. You may be in a situation where corporate history dictates promotion policies that are not to your benefit. In such cases, your best alternative may be to seek opportunity elsewhere.

In my case, I left a comfortable position with a Wall Street firm to become the chief financial officer of a technology firm and subsequently guided it through a national public offering of common stock and several acquisitions and mergers. I did return to Wall Street finance after several years, becoming a specialty product manager with a regional investment boutique, a position that would have been unavailable without my time as a CFO. The combined experiences enabled me to form an oil and gas exploration firm and accomplish a multi-million dollar public stock offering before age 35.

Final Word

Ambition is a double-edged sword. Brandished with reason and restraint, it can spur one to efforts and achievements once thought unattainable. However, when unfulfilled, it can leave a person bitter, empty, and alone.

As a young man in the dominant Wall Street firm of the 1960s, I hungrily sought promotion into office management, being the graduate of a unique and selective two-year training program followed by three exceptionally successful years as a stock brokerage representative. In those days, conventional wisdom was that employees under the age of 35 lacked the experience and sangfroid to successfully manage a retail brokerage office, especially with older representatives who had more experience.

Frustrated with a policy that seemed antiquated, I resigned from the firm and sought employment elsewhere. As a consequence of my departure, and that of others from the training programs, the firm changed its policies – to the benefit of my more patient colleagues. In the two years following my resignation, many of my classmates were promoted to office management with higher salaries and benefits before the age of 30. By Wall Street standards, their rise in the ranks was unprecedented.

Success in the form of promotions rarely occurs as quickly as we would like. Big companies have big bureaucracies that sometimes react slowly. However, the best-managed organizations, regardless of size, do ultimately correct their course. Exhibiting patience early in one's career can pay off in significant benefits later.

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Final Word

While several skills are necessary for every person's progress up the corporate ranks, the most essential thing you can do is take responsibility for your own career success. You have a significant number of competitors, many of whom are just as (if not more) qualified for the promotion. If you want success, you have to seek it. Be patient when patience is justified, and don't be afraid to seek greener pastures when necessary.

How do you intend to climb the corporate ladder?